POLLY PUT THE KETTLE ON

Is it pure chance or a malignant fate which sends George Sudley to the village of Lambing, when, newly released from gaol, he seeks a place in which to start his new life? For he chooses it simply by sticking a pin in his *Bradshaw*. Once there, however, and once he has met the lovely Polly Edge, George has sealed his doom, and there can be no drawing back. A victim of love at first sight, George becomes all too deeply involved in a chain of grim and swift-moving events, culminating in murder. This book is written with the sureness and precision, the ingenuity and the beautiful accuracy of dialogue and character-drawing that we might well expect from the author of *The Man Who Looked Back*. It is an excellent piece of craftsmanship: it is also first-class entertainment.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Two Lovers Too Many
A Daisy-Chain for Satan
Gallows in My Garden
The Man Who Looked Back

POLLY PUT THE KETTLE ON

JOAN FLEMING

THE MYSTERY BOOK GUILD
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To

FRANK EVANS HOPE

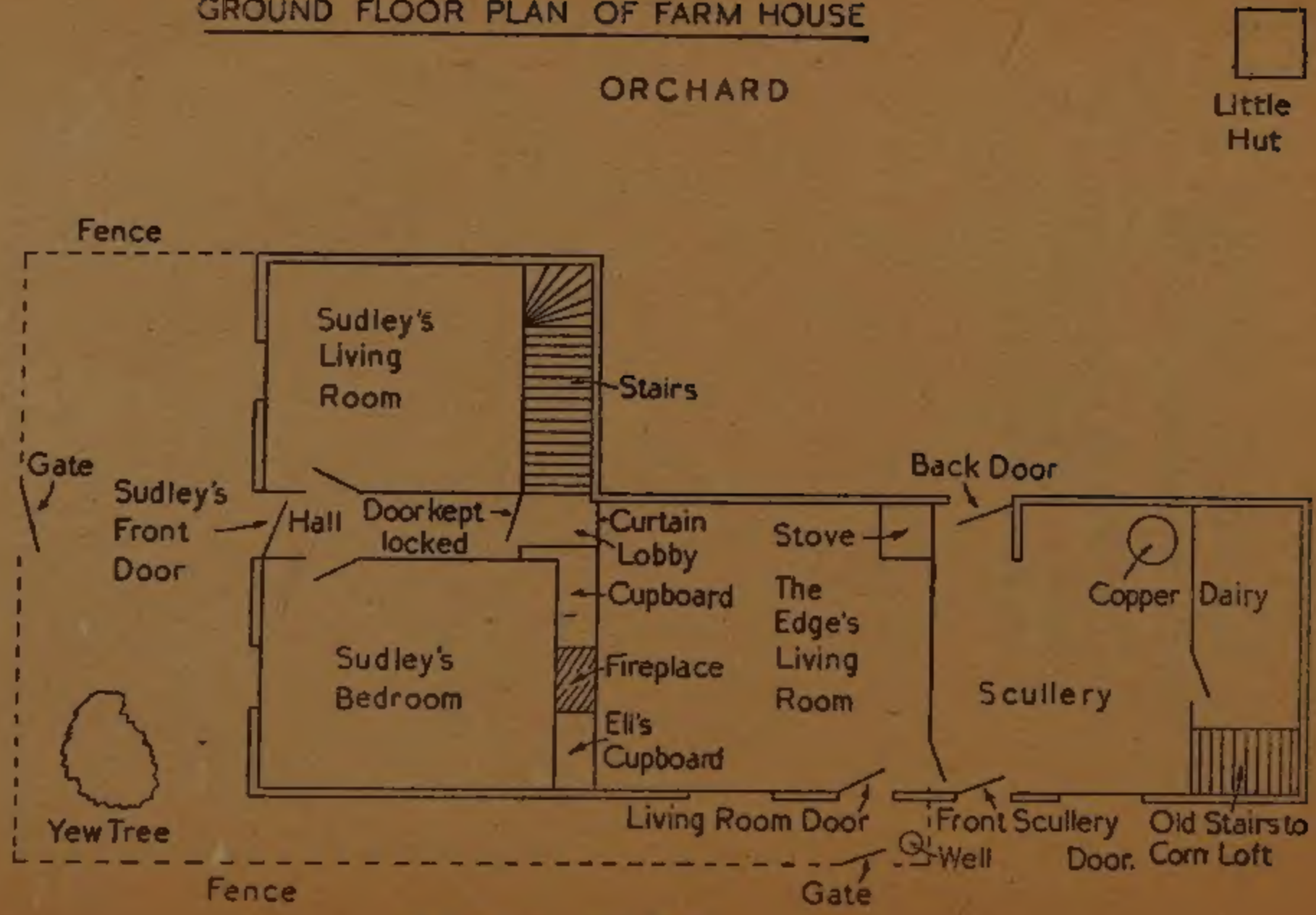
of the C.I.D.

this manuscript is dedicated, with
some diffidence, in the belief that
it may shed light in dark places

The action of the book takes place before the Criminal Justice Act, 1948.

All the characters are imaginary and no reference is made or intended to any person alive or dead.

GROUND FLOOR PLAN OF FARM HOUSE



CHAPTER I

If I am to record with absolute honesty how it all happened, then I must be careful, for being honest, if only with myself, does not come naturally. I must start at the very beginning of the story and this, if I really am to be perfectly frank, starts with my release from Parkhurst after serving three-and-a-half years of a five-year sentence.

It starts with the clanging of the ornamental gates behind me, with the tingling in my right hand from the grip of the chief warden. "Good-bye, Sudley," he said, "and best of luck!" He handed me a ticket to London, five shillings and the address of the Prisoners' Aid Society. He seemed about to say something else, but changed his mind, and I was dismissed with a nod. As I walked down the drive between the neat flower borders on that gleaming morning my hand still tingled from the friendly clasp.

I did not look back. I suppose I was glad to escape from what I certainly regarded as the absolute hell of prison life. When the gates shut behind me I went on walking self-consciously—left, right, left, right, left, right getting a sharp feeling of pleasure from merely putting one foot in front of the other. I held my head high and sniffed the air appreciatively. Left, right, left, right. I turned out of the prison drive and on to the high road. Left, right, left, right. Past the military camp, I felt in my pocket for the packet of Woodbines which the chaplain had given me last night, and I stepped aside from the road, sitting carefully on the cross-bar of a gate, to smoke my first fag of freedom.

I liked the chaplain and I think he liked me. I think he enjoyed a talk with a man of so-called education and, it might seem, of intelligence. We had had some interesting conversations during my three-and-a-half years. I think he was sorry to see me go because he was uneasy (and how rightly!) about my future.

"What are you going to do, Sudley?" he said as he gave me the fags. "Have you any plans?"

I had no plans and I said so.

"Um. Want any suggestions?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I'd try for some outdoor job if I were you. You've had experience of market gardening here; I should look for the same sort of work. You want an outdoor job with that chest of yours, and you want hard work, hard physical labour that'll make you sleep when you fall into bed."

I listened.

"The trouble with you, Sudley . . ." he said, and then corrected himself, "but I'm not going to preach."

"Go on," I said, "what is the trouble with me? I'd be interested to hear."

"Somehow, somewhere, probably in your extreme youth, you got the idea that money was the most desirable thing in life."

"Well, isn't it?"

"That's a moot point. What you want is the money without having to work for it. You believe that money is due to you by some natural process. Maybe there's a lot of folk who feel that way; the only difference is that they do have money by birth or by right, but you don't."

"Well, padre," I said, "that's one hell of a big difference. What am I going to do about it?"

"Do what I suggested. Find an outdoor job and work hard. Hard work agrees with you. You're a far better specimen now than when you first came. Work hard!"

"Oh boy, oh boy!" I jeered. "You don't want to preach!"

He laughed and handed me my packet of fags, and was I enjoying it! Sitting there on the gate in the midst of that shining morning, smoking a cigarette, a free man!

I looked at my liberty suit, a natty grey herring-bone. I took out of my pocket a slip of paper on which was written: H.M. IS GRACIOUSLY PLEASED TO GRANT TO DEREK ANNESLEY ST. GEORGE SUDLEY HIS ROYAL LICENCE TO BE AT LARGE. I looked at it for a long time; I could have torn it into tiny shreds and thrown them on to the grass at my feet, but I felt somehow that it was a talisman. I folded it very carefully and put it in my empty note-case. Then I took out the address of

the Prisoners' Aid Society and looked at it for a long time. A thrush nearby was screaming its head off. Then I took out my railway ticket and examined it. "Destination Waterloo," I told the thrush, and somehow or other I couldn't help laughing. I threw my head back and roared and the thrush flew away in a fright. "Destination Waterloo!" I shouted, and laughed like hell. Then I stopped laughing and combed my hair, picked up my brown-paper parcel containing more gifts from His Majesty (an extra shirt and some bully beef sandwiches) and marched off down the road towards the station—left, right, left, right—happier than any king.

I left a peach of a morning in the Isle of Wight; at Waterloo the sky had come right down to within a few feet. The breaths of millions of people had congealed in the faintly frosty air and formed the sort of fog which Londoners put up with so cheerfully in the early spring. I went into the A.B.C. for a cup of tea and a bun. I couldn't help staring around me, noticing every tiny detail. I felt I should never have enough time for sucking in those minute details which make up ordinary life: a stocking with a twisted seam, the drop at the end of an old man's nose, spilt tea on the lino-covered table, the brassy glint in the waitress's hair, a small girl wearing a doughnut on her finger like a ring, a pigeon strutting about the station approach as though traffic did not exist, the round balls suspended from the plane trees like drab Christmas-tree decorations, a dirty comic lying discarded in the gutter. And because I looked at people with interest they, if they noticed, looked back at me with an arrogant stare as much as to say, "Well, what are you looking at?" No one notices anyone else in London, everyone shuffles about intent on his own business; sultans, midgets, murderers, saints, convicts at large mingle unnoticed with the mediocre and no one gives a damn.

The chaplain is right, I thought, it is outdoor work I need now. London wouldn't suit me any more. I need fresh air. And maybe he's right about hard work, too. I'm used to working now, maybe I'd better get a job right away, whilst the urge is on me. I'll get hold of a Bradshaw, I decided, and I'll open it at random and stick a pin in with my eyes shut, and I'll go wherever the pin lands. Anywhere in the British Isles!

If that wasn't a fair bargain I'd like to know what is.

The booking-clerk lent me a Bradshaw. I hadn't got a pin, but with my eyes shut I stabbed my finger at random amongst a list of destinations.

Hell, I thought, of all the counties in England Bedfordshire is my least favourite!

Thinking, however, that it would be bad luck if I were to break my promise with myself, I got on a bus for St. Pancras Station and doggedly bought a single ticket for the country town some fifteen miles from Bedford which my finger had chanced upon.

The Labour Exchange was shut when I finally arrived, so I had to spend the night in the Y.M. But first thing in the morning I was round at the Labour Exchange asking for outdoor work, preferably market gardening.

"There's a job right here," the clerk told me, "in the market garden behind the gasworks. It's only temporary, but it's well paid."

"Haven't you anything else?"

The clerk shook his head, studying his book. "There's plenty of farm work required, but most of it is some way off."

"Then hand it out," I said irritably, "I've no desire to stay in this dump."

"Take a resident job?"

"Sure. Where is it?"

"Farm labourer, single-handed."

"Single-handed!" I repeated unenthusiastically.

"Smallholding at Lambing, Hill Farm it's called; seventy acres. The owner is laid up with sciatica. That's only temporary, too, and it's not so well paid as the market-garden job."

"Where is Lambing?"

The clerk scratched the top of his head with his pencil. "There's a bus goes through it, if I remember rightly; they'll tell you at the bus station. I'm not saying it isn't off the beaten track, though. How about the job here?"

I stood hesitating. I wonder why I did hesitate.

"Well, come on," the clerk said impatiently, "make your mind up."

"I don't fancy the job behind the gasworks," I said, but then, neither did I fancy the job on the smallholding.

"Go and have a look at the Lambing job," the clerk advised. "There is no need to take it. But if you do turn it down you should try and think up some good reason, otherwise you won't get your fare out there paid."

I was still curiously reluctant. My eyes searched the book the clerk had in front of him; there were evidently other jobs going.

"Look," he said, "there are other jobs, but I take them in rotation, it's time we got the Hill Farm job fixed up. Go and have a look at it, and if there's anything wrong, as I say, there's no need to take it." He wrote the address on a piece of paper for me and I put it in my pocket alongside the address the chief warden had given me.

At the bus station I found that Lambing was on the Bedford-London bus route and that buses were fairly frequent; but when I arrived at the small insignificant village I found that Hill Farm was at the hamlet of Cloud, some two miles out. There was no way of getting there other than by walking.

I walked out, through the village, past a row of cottages, past the Wesleyan chapel, past the sawmill, past a row of council houses, and then past nothing at all except hedge for a mile or so until I arrived at what, evidently, was the hamlet of Cloud.

Cloud was nothing but two rows of cottages, at right angles to each other, several farms, a considerable duckpond, a small pub called the Red Letter and a tiny building that had once been a chapel but which was now a corn-store. I walked up and down the hamlet without seeing a soul until, at last, I was obliged to knock at the door of a cottage. "Hill Farm?"

The old woman who answered my knock pointed, without a word. I followed the direction of her pointing, along a lane, past a few more cottages, to another farm. There the lane ended; immediately beyond this farm were white wooden gates, and beyond the gates a driveway, in very poor condition, wound upwards some fifty yards or so, up across a very green field, to yet another farm. Someone was looking at me out of the window of the farm by the gates. "Hill Farm?" I called.

It was a woman. She left the window and came out of a side door and round to the front in order, I have no doubt, to inspect me.

"This is Cloud Farm," she said, affably enough. "That is Hill Farm."

She was a middle-aged woman with a pleasant face. There was a little more to her than one would have expected, emerging as she did from the undistinguished farm-house. She was wearing a curiously smart hat with certain geometric juttings, and she had pretty teeth. She would have liked a little chat, I am sure, but, certain now that I would not like Hill Farm, I was anxious to press on and convince myself that it was no place for me.

The pathway up to the house—it certainly could not be called a drive—was indeed in poor condition. Towards the top there was a huge enamel bath into which a tap dripped mournfully. At the immediate top of the path was a pond covered with green slime and beyond the pond were a row of dead willow trees—at least, I assumed them to be dead for they were putting forth none of the green fluff I had noticed on other willow trees. Beyond the willow trees the ground fell away towards a really pleasant and extensive view. The farm-house had a flat-faced look, with a front door flanked by two straight windows, like a child's drawing. The front door was obviously not used; the pathway up which I had come turned sharply to the left into an absolutely filthy farmyard. A kitchen door stood wide open. It was clean enough inside; indeed, an elderly crone was engaged in mopping the stone floor.

"Mr. Edge?"

"*Mr. Edge!*" the old woman screamed, with a noise that went rattling round inside my skull long after it had ceased. "Gentleman to see you, dear!"

In the living-room Mr. Edge lay upon a long hard sofa covered in mud-coloured moquette, as I believe the stuff is called. I remember the name "moquette" because when I was a small boy my legs at the back of my knees used to get uncomfortably scratched by the same material on buses and in trains. He was stroking one cat which lay across his knee in

voluptuous abandon, whilst two others were rolled up on the sofa beside him.

I disliked the farm so much that I was prepared to dislike the owner even more, but he was surprisingly pleasant. He was a big man, over six feet, with a great deal of untidy hair and a round, healthy face. He had no teeth at all, but he had certainly shaved and he looked as though he washed reasonably often. He was wholesome-looking. The John Bull type.

He asked me a few perfunctory questions. I told him that I had been doing market gardening for some years in the Isle of Wight. That seemed to satisfy him. He evidently took to me, for in no time at all he became informative. He was turned sixty, he said, and he had never had a day's illness in his life until this confounded sciatica struck him. He'd lived at Hill Farm all his life, and run it almost single-handed. It had belonged to his father, to his grandfather, and even to his great-grandfather; there had never been anyone but Edges at Hill Farm.

A dull fact which did not impress me one way or the other.

There had been a German prisoner living on the farm since the end of the war, he told me, but he had recently left, and Edge had been carrying on alone. He referred once or twice to "the missus" and I naturally assumed her to be the crone I had seen mopping the floor. He took me behind a scratchy curtain (moquette again?), through a thin varnished door into a narrow hall leading to the front door. He showed me the two rooms I had seen from outside, one on either side of the front door. They were very small; one was a bedroom and the other a sitting-room with two armchairs and a small table beside the fireplace.

"You'll have your meals alone in here," he said and, looking slightly sheepish, he added: "The missus and I haven't been married so long. Eyvind, that's the German we had, used to fetch his tray from the kitchen, bringing it round the outside so as not to disturb us." He looked at me as though to question whether I was prepared to do the same thing. I nodded, but I had already decided not to stay. I didn't take to the place.

Bang in front of the bedroom window was a big buxom yew tree, blocking out all the view and most of the light. "My

great-grandfather planted that," Mr. Edge said; "there was one on each side of the door. It was planted to protect the house from the westerly gales. The other one died. But this is a fine specimen, isn't it?"

There was a certain likeable naïveté about the old boy; he seemed inordinately proud of his one-horse show.

Back in the long low living-room, which was the core and centre of the house, I looked out of the window. There should have been a magnificent view from that south-facing window, but it looked out across the farmyard directly on to a huge barn, a great black wooden affair with a corrugated-iron roof which had been well tarred.

"My great-grandfather built that," Mr. Edge said admiringly; "it's the only farm building I've got left. Everything else has fallen down. When I was a lad I could remember a line of buildings on both sides of this yard."

"Oh!" I said, for there seemed no other comment.

"Now there's only the barn left. I do the milking in the cowshed at that end of it."

No proper cow-house! I said as much.

"There's no need for a cow-house when part of a fine barn like that can be used," I was told.

No milking-machine!

"All done by hand," Mr. Edge said proudly, showing me his hands, and I could quite believe it.

There was no tractor either, for now the crops were all dealt with by a kindly Government who arranged that the corn should be reaped and threshed and everything else on the spot.

But I wasn't really interested, I wanted to get away; I stayed long enough for civility and then I said I would have to think it over. I asked him for my fare, though I knew damn' well I wasn't going to take the job. He handed it over a little reluctantly, I thought.

"I'd have liked the missus to see you," he murmured.

But I had no wish to see his missus, nor to stay any longer. I wished him good day and hurried off, through the filthy farmyard, past the bath and the dripping tap, down the path and out through the white gate, metaphorically shaking the dust off my feet.

Immediately outside the gate I was accosted—yes, accosted is the word—by the woman from Cloud Farm I had seen on my way there. She came out absolutely wreathed in smiles.

"I know who you are," she said. "You've come to replace Eyvind, the German they had, haven't you?"

I hadn't, but it didn't matter if she thought so. I offered her one of the five fags I had left in the chaplain's packet.

"Lovely morning, isn't it?" I said. It wasn't, but the first fine careless rapture of being outside hadn't yet worn off. I had plenty of time before my bus back from Lambing to the town; she might even offer me a meal. She too was bursting with information.

"We're not really farmers," she said. "Mr. Merry is in business. My son runs the farm; he's been to an agricultural college and he's doing very well. His dad is pleased with him."

In spite of the ease of her manner with me she seemed nervous about something. She kept looking along the lane as though she were expecting someone, but though we could see right to the end of the lane, where it joined the road to Lambing, there was not a soul in sight. When we had smoked our cigarettes and I was replete with dull facts about the Merry family there seemed no reason for staying any longer. I tried to get away. It was a little awkward, she seemed so sure that I was definitely engaged to work at Hill Farm, and I, still hopeful of a meal—indeed, getting distinctly hungry—did not want to tell her that nothing would induce me to stay there. However, it was evident that I wouldn't be getting a meal, for how could she be preparing one whilst standing at her gate talking to me?

But she didn't want me to go and I couldn't make out why. I could have understood it if she had made any sign that she wanted me to make love to her, but there was nothing of that about it. She was full of an honest *camaraderie*, nothing more.

"Well, Mrs. Merry," I said, "I've enjoyed our little chat. I must be pushing off, and you'll have to be getting dinner ready, I guess."

"Yes, I will," she agreed absently, screwing up her eyes and peering anxiously down the lane like Sister Anne.

A girl had turned into the lane, she was riding a bicycle.

As she approached I saw that the basket on her handlebars was full of household goods.

There was a hell of a noise going on, there always is in the country. There were cows mooing, hens clucking, dogs barking, tractors grinding away not far off, a radio from a farm kitchen blaring out, trainer 'planes from the nearest aerodrome crackling overhead, and then the woman, Mrs. Merry, said, "Hallo, Polly, here you are!"

And just then, behind us, a huge great cock that hadn't uttered before, crew and startled me nearly out of my wits.

The chaplain was always harping on the Gospels, I had had them rammed down my throat for the last three-and-a-half years. It says in St. Matthew, ". . . *and immediately the cock crew.*"

I ought to have taken that as a warning. I ought to have bolted down the lane, brown-paper parcel under my arm, at the double, leaving Mrs. Merry and the girl with the bicycle gaping after me.

But I didn't. I stood staring at the girl.

Even though I had spent three-and-a-half years seeing no women at all other than the wives of the staff, I wasn't one to be too easily pleased. I can say now in sober truth that I have never in my life, either before that moment or since, set eyes on such a sexy piece. It wasn't loud or obvious; the type which has everything on view like a help-yourself counter leaves me as cold as mutton.

She was a gentle sort of girl really. She just had everything that it takes. Everything.

Once, when I was in Switzerland, I got myself—don't ask me how—at the bottom of a narrow gully. Outside it was full daylight, with the sun shining; I looked up and, in the narrow strip of sky way up at the top of the gully, there were stars shining, whacking great stars, twinkling away just like you're told in fairy stories, but which in real life they never seem to do. Whacking great stars!

Well, standing there in that country lane with the farmer's mother nattering away behind me, I stared at the girl, and I felt like I did when I was standing at the bottom of that gully

looking up: looking up at the great luscious stars twinkling away, miles up above me . . .

And I reckon I've been feeling that way ever since.

. . . . . .

Well, coming right down from stars to brass tacks, as it were, I knew there was only one place for me, and that was in bed with that girl. Was it going to be easy? Judging by appearances it was—very. I have never learned not to judge by appearances.

I think probably Mrs. Merry was saying something, but I didn't catch what it was for the girl was smiling at me and there was a sort of singing in my ears. Then she looked away and I came to in time to hear Mrs. Merry saying something about, ". . . nice for Mr. Edge to have got someone at last."

I began to speak, but somehow my voice had gone queer. I was obliged to clear my throat once or twice, and whilst I was doing so Mrs. Merry said, "This is Mrs. Edge."

"What?" I barked, giving myself time to adjust my thoughts.

"Mrs. Edge."

Missus—too bad! Edge's daughter-in-law. He'd said nothing about having a son. Missus, indeed! Well, never mind.

I said quickly: "I told Mr. Edge I would think it over. But as a matter of fact——" I stopped suddenly, put out by the curious expression on the face of the woman Merry. There was an uncomfortable silence. I felt bound to go on. ". . . as a matter of fact I have made up my mind. I was on my way down to the pub for a bite of something and a drink, and then I was coming back to tell Mr. Edge I'd be pleased to stay."

This information had the effect I had hoped. I was invited to a midday meal at Hill Farm. "I hope you can start work right away?" the girl added.

"Yes," I said, "right away."

"What about your luggage?"

"I've got a clean shirt here," I said, indicating my brown-paper parcel, "and a toothbrush." And then I was suddenly stricken. The Sovereign had looked after me, body and soul, for three-and-a-half years and had finally provided me with a

brand-new liberty suit. I couldn't start milking cows in my natty grey herring-bone. I looked down at myself, and that blessed woman Merry read my thoughts.

"You can't work in that fine suit," she said.

"No, I can't," I agreed, "but it will take a bit of time to get my baggage along." It would indeed. I had no baggage nor yet the money to buy anything with. "I don't know what to do," I murmured, "if Mr. Edge wants me to start right away."

I wonder, now, that neither of them got on to it. Why was I wandering round the countryside looking for work in a brand-new suit and shirt with a parcel containing an extra shirt under my arm? The answer seemed obvious, but evidently not to them. They looked from one to the other in that constructive, helpful way women sometimes have when there is a man to be looked after.

"Yes," Mrs. Merry nodded thoughtfully, "those jodhpurs of John's have come back from the wash too small for him. You can have them with pleasure, Mr.—er——"

"Sudley," I said promptly. "George Sudley. That's mighty kind of you, Mrs. Merry."

"John's a huge boy," Mrs. Edge said kindly, in order, no doubt, that I should not feel ridiculous in accepting breeches which had grown too small for Mrs. Merry's son. They went on from strength to strength. I was to have one of Mr. Merry's old pullovers and there was a windjammer Eyvind had left behind.

"I 'as my pride," I said, humorously I hoped. "I shall buy myself some boots." What I was to use for money the Lord only knew, but as He had provided in the past, so, I felt, would He provide in the future. As it happened, one of the little cottages along the lane was also a shop, which fact I might have guessed from the tin "Lyons' Tea" notices hanging outside. In addition to Lyons' tea I gathered Mrs. Tegg sold everything required to keep body and soul together, including gum boots for all ages of man, woman and child. I could get gum boots to fit myself from her, and of course I would get them on tick, paying for them when I got my first pay-packet.

So everything was song and dance, and as we (she and I!) let ourselves in through the white gate and walked (side by side!) up the pathway to the house, I felt Mrs. Merry beaming after us, as full of benevolence and goodwill as The Lilac Fairy.

"Ah, there you are, Sudley! Back already!" Mr. Edge cried from the mud-coloured sofa. "I hope this means you've made up your mind to stay. I see you've met the missus."

I suppose I must have looked quite idiotic, my eyelids went on blinking on their own like one of those stupid things you buy on Southend pier. It was from shock. I couldn't control them. I was so shocked I couldn't answer him for the moment. I simply stood there blinking.

She answered for me. "Yes, he's staying. He'll be having dinner with us. I'd better go and see to it now."

"Polly is a shocking bad cook," Mr. Edge said playfully.

"Oh, Eli!" she responded, pouting. And then I started to laugh. I laughed, I roared. It was partly, I suppose, nervous reaction from the shock I had had, and partly because I was genuinely amused.

I had been thinking that the whole set-up was so extraordinarily Cold Comfort Farm that I would be surprised if Mr. Edge's name didn't turn out to be Urk Starkadder. And it very nearly did! *Eli*, I ask you! Eli Edge! He came of strong Wesleyan parents.

Then the laughter really got hold of me, the way it does sometimes, striking me amidships and causing me to bend nearly double, helpless.

They were not amused, they waited politely, mildly surprised, until I had stopped laughing.

"How old are you, Sudley?" Mr. Edge asked solemnly.

"Thirty," I replied, wiping my eyes. "Honestly," I added.

"You look more," he observed, "but you might well be a good deal less."

"The older I get," I said sententiously—I had to say something to show that I hadn't taken offence—"the funnier things seem."

"I never thought we were a very funny couple," Mr. Edge said, wonderingly.

"Oh, I wasn't laughing at you," I protested, adding (for

it couldn't do any harm), "sir. As a matter of fact I just remembered something I read about. A stud bull called Big Business . . ." If that wasn't enough to make anyone laugh I don't know what is. But evidently they had neither of them heard of Big Business. They looked at me blankly. Realizing that I had made a very poor start I retreated to my quarters behind the prickly curtain.

CHAPTER II

IT IS supposed to be a great help in life to have a sense of humour. Nothing, they say, can happen to you if you really see the funny side of things. Well, I can see the funny side of things all right. I suppose I have a sense of humour, yet everything happens to me. I have been what I supposed was "in love" with a great many women in my time, and I've always been able to see the funny side of it. But there has never been anything I found amusing about my love for Polly Edge. One's first love, they say, is always serious; there's nothing about it that is light or witty or amusing, there is a knife deep in the heart and every movement causes pain. I didn't find that with my first love, but I did with my last. With Polly Edge, my last love, I was "so deeply smitten through the helm" that, as I now know, the wound was mortal.

However, it all started pleasantly and lightly enough.

For the first few days I worked hard, I saw her only when I went for my tray of food or when I went to the living-room for instructions from Mr. Edge, who still lay on the mud-coloured sofa, in apparent pain. I milked the ten cows, early and late, I poured the milk over the cooler and then into the big cans and, on the milk-trolley, I wheeled them down to the gate, leaving them standing on a wooden platform to be collected by the milk-lorry once a day. I collected hundreds of eggs, washed them under a cold tap and packed them in cases for the packing-station. I fed the hens and I cleaned out the part of the barn that was used as a cow-house. It was a full day's work.

In the evening I went down to the Red Letter and, over half a pint of bitter, which was all I could afford out of what was left of my five shillings, I learned a good deal about the *ménage* at Hill Farm.

No one, it seemed, had anything much against Eli Edge. He just wasn't popular. He had been married to Polly for less than two years, the first Mrs. Edge having died three years ago. The first Mrs. Edge, I learned, was not young. He had married her when she was forty, eleven years older than himself. It seemed that after the first world war Hill Farm was in a poor way, Eli hadn't so much as the money to get his boots repaired. Then a wealthy horse-dealer with an unmarried daughter had offered to buy up the mortgage and give it to him as a wedding present. He'd been courting the pretty daughter of the post-mistress in Lambing, but he dropped her and married the horse-dealer's daughter. Though they'd had no children she had made him a very good wife; she was thrifty, they had spent nothing. Eli had worked very hard, running the farm single-handed until quite recently. They were reckoned to be pretty well off by the time old Mrs. Edge had died. They never spent their money, though. Lately, since farming had become a profitable business, everyone else had launched out into modern improvements -milking-machines, mechanical separators, electric churns, new cow-houses and so forth. But not so Hill Farm. They had carried on as usual. It was all money pouring in and none going out.

This explained what puzzled me. Eli Edge, one realized almost at once, was a mean man, but he had none of the characteristics of the miser. He was amiable and kindly and reasonably companionable, but he would not spend money. He wouldn't even spend to better his farm. He took a pride in the broken-down buildings, in having no proper cow-house, in toiling day in and day out, laboriously doing things by hand that everyone else was doing with modern machinery.

I could understand it; he had never forgotten exactly what it was like to be penniless, to have no money at all. Yes, I could understand him perfectly, and, understanding, I could like him.

It is curious how, in these out-of-the-way villages all over

England, they don't forget things. Events of forty and fifty years' standing are discussed as easily as though they had happened yesterday. Eli Edge's first marriage was as much news—indeed, I could imagine more so—as his present marriage. His present marriage, in fact, was hardly mentioned. But it may be that the fact of my living at Hill Farm caused my companions in the pub to keep off the subject.

When I was next in the long low living-room I picked up a photograph from the chimney-piece.

"That's Mrs. Edge," Eli said. He referred always to his first wife as Mrs. Edge and his second wife as "the missus"; the distinction was one which evidently satisfied him.

I looked with interest at the round plate-like face. Even in the photograph the mother-love simply shone out of her eyes. Instinctively I looked for the mother-of-pearl brooch with the word "Mother" inscribed on it in twisted silver wire; she was wearing a large cameo.

"No children?" I murmured.

"It was the Lord's will," Eli answered, a trifle harshly, I thought.

"She was a wonderful woman, was Mrs. Edge," he remarked, and, gathering up his favourite tortoiseshell cat, he leaned back on his sofa, saying no more and leaving me to make my own conclusions. Which I did.

He was right about Polly's cooking. She was a fearful cook, and, what's more, you could see she never would be any good; she just wasn't interested. Heaven knows I wasn't fussy. I'd lived for years on pig swill, I ate everything I was given because I was hungry; but there was no pleasure in it. Never a day passed without Eli Edge making some sort of dirty crack about her cooking, and after a while it got me. I wanted to tell him that God didn't make Polly the shape she was in order that she should be a good cook. I don't mean that there aren't a great many cooks with marvellous figures, I guess there are; but I mean—well, he'd got so much that it was greedy to want a good cook thrown in, as it were. What absolutely got me beat was how Polly came to marry him at all, and to get herself to this outlandish spot and take up the hard life of a small farmer's wife.

For the first few days I did not say much to her, but whenever I was anywhere near I observed her closely. I suppose, now, that I must have been waiting for some sort of "come hither" sign from her, but there was nothing. She treated me with a tiresome friendliness. "Had a good night?" "Was your bed perfectly comfortable?" "Are you sure there's nothing you want?"

When she said this last she was standing about three feet away from me and she looked right into my face, lifting her own perfect face towards mine without a flicker, without the ghost of a smile, without a flutter of an eyelid. Was I sure there was nothing I wanted! I looked at her with what you might call a meaning look, and after a moment she turned away, not flustered or coy, she just turned away uninterested. There's nothing doing there, I told myself, but of course I didn't believe it. If I had I should have gone out then and there and cut my throat, and, thinking it over, that is what I ought to have done. It would have saved a great deal of trouble in the long run.

The girl seemed a little absentminded, I decided at last, slightly vague, just the least bit dreamy. I would observe her staring into the fire or looking out of the window up at the sky over the barn roof, rather longer than was necessary. After a while, unpleasant though the thought was, I came to the conclusion that she was in love, and it wasn't with me and it wasn't with Eli Edge. I watched her very closely with Eli; she seemed fond of him, even a trifle in awe, she seemed almost grateful to him, and she certainly toiled around all day long in his interests; but I was quite certain she didn't love him.

So she had a lover and that, I told myself comfortingly, was why I wasn't getting any further with her.

I looked round. I didn't have very far to look. I had only, in fact, to look over the hedge into the next field and I saw him, driving the tractor. Every time the tractor came round our side of the field he stood up and craned his scraggy neck, looking for her. Once she came out, the corners of her coloured pinafore fluttering in the breeze, and stood with her arms folded, talking to him through a gap in the hedge. What they were talking about over the loud throbbing noise of the

tractor, heaven knows, they were giggling like a couple of school kids. "Ta-ta, for now, Johnny!" she called, running back into the house.

So it was John Merry! John Merry, whose breeches I was wearing, the breeches which had grown too small for him! Well, if they were too small for him they were also too small for me! I am not above average height, indeed I suppose I am slightly below it, and John Merry was a great, long, lanky youth with no substance to him at all; his breeches were too tight for me in more places than one. He had light, straw-coloured hair and a pale face, not innocent of spots, and a huge nose breaking out of the middle of his pasty face like a rude word. And was he tall! He went up and up.

As Francis Bacon says:

> Wise nature did never put her precious jewels
> into a garret four stories high; and therefore . . .
> exceeding tall men had ever very empty heads.

In the first few days I was at Hill Farm I saw him there half a dozen times or so, and I don't know how often he was there when I didn't see him. He came on the stupidest of pretexts—to borrow a tool, to ask if they had seen something of mutual interest in the local paper, or simply to ask Mr. Edge how he was. He even came with no pretext at all, hanging around aimlessly, his head bent to avoid the beams across the ceiling, his hands in his pockets, slouching before the fire, watching Polly.

I wondered at the time how Mr. Edge stood it, but I realize now that he did not think of John as completely grown-up and I am quite certain he never thought of him as his wife's admirer. Eli had had a very strict upbringing, and having lived all his life at Hill Farm, I did not think the idea of illicit love ever entered his head, in spite of the Sunday papers. Nor did the vast difference in age between himself and Polly impress him one way or the other; he was a man of no imagination.

I took it upon myself, hardly altruistically, of course, to protect the Edge marriage. What was Mrs. Merry thinking about, I wondered, to allow her young son to hang around

Polly? I was determined to find out how things stood with her. Choosing a time when I knew John was occupied, I could hear his tractor engine in the distance and I knew he was busy in the bottom field, I went down to Cloud Farm, ostensibly to thank Mrs. Merry for the loan of the jodhpurs and the pullover.

She saw me coming, of course. I never passed the farm without her seeing me from one window or another. How she ever got any work done I don't know, I never saw her occupied with anything but observing the comings and goings at Hill Farm. If she'd only mind her own business, I thought, and do a little less minding of other people's, she'd be a lot better off. She'd attend, for instance, to that gangling son of hers and see that he didn't spend his time hanging around her neighbour's young wife.

I was ready to start right in on my reasons for coming, but I was put off by the unexpected presence of her husband. It was easy to see from whom John got his height, but he was not like his father in looks. Mr. Merry sat beside the kitchen range reading the newspaper; he was stretched out before the fire, miles of him, so that no one could have got near the blaze without stepping right across his legs.

"This is Mr. Sudley, who is working for Eli, dear," she said.

"How do," he grunted, glancing at me and returning to his paper. Mrs. Merry smiled, but now her smile was a weak nervous thing; she was obviously in awe of her husband and in time I learned why.

Mr. Merry was, oddly enough, a hat manufacturer. I suppose it is not really very odd, there have to be hat manufacturers; it was only surprising that he should live at Cloud Farm. He had bought Cloud Farm for John when his son had left the agricultural college some five years ago, and John ran it on his own. Before they came there they had lived in a suburban villa on the outskirts of the town in which Mr. Merry made hats, and I suppose the furniture of the farmhouse confirmed this. I remember, even on my first visit, being surprised at the new modern furniture, the light oak dining-room suite, the cocktail cabinet and the off-white Indian carpet.

The sort of hats Mr. Merry made were good class, they were

sold at the best big stores and all bore the legend "Merry Model" on a silk ribbon sewn inside.

Twice a year Mr. Merry would dart off to Paris by air and return with a selection of the latest models. Then he would go into a huddle with his chief designer and there would emerge three hats—New Season's Models, they were called. Each of them looked remarkably like last season's "New Season's Models", but were made in large editions of some hundreds, even thousands, at a time, sent off to the big shops all over England and Scotland, and even exported in fair quantities. Felt and velours were despatched in August and light straws in February. All this caused Mr. Merry to consider himself something of a mystic, above the ordinary run of folk. I think he fancied himself as a creative artist and thought his wife and son pretty miserable clay beneath his feet.

When I learned all about Pa Merry I became convinced that he kept a lover in Paris. She would live in a little flat, certainly not in the *rive gauche*, and Mr. Merry would always be very punctual with the rent. I bet he felt no end of a dog striding around the boulevards with the little bit of a thing hanging on to his arm. I would often amuse myself with these thoughts, but I was probably quite wrong.

What amused me even more was that Ma Merry used to be his chief model. She had been photogenic and every hat she put on suited her. At one time, in advertisements of "Merry Models", it was always she who appeared in the photograph, wearing each New Season's creation. She became quite well known as "Merry Models" model. I suppose she was knocked all of a heap when the head of the firm asked her to marry him, and she had remained all of a heap ever since. One felt that she was still so breathless with awe of him that whenever she spoke she bit off the "sir" with some difficulty. Though I never heard her actually call him Mr. Merry to his face, she certainly always did behind his back.

After John was born she never modelled again; in giving birth to John, one was told in a vague way, she lost her looks. And indeed one was not surprised.

Great man though he might be, Pa Merry was unambitious about his home; though reasonably well run and undoubtedly

prosperous, it was an undistinguished farm and he seemed content to sit in the kitchen, reading the papers, listening to the radio and smoking.

Pa Merry intrigued me a great deal, and I am sorry he does not impinge more upon my story. I have to record him, however, for he helps to explain his wife and son, who do impinge in quite a big way.

Whilst engaged in trivial exchanges about borrowed clothes I speculated about Ma Merry. I have never been one who dissembles easily, but I do realize that to get along at all in ordinary society it has to be done. I have always found it difficult not to say exactly what I am thinking and now the ferocious words were leaping about behind my teeth like a pack of hounds: Why can't you keep that great lout of a son of yours away from Polly Edge? I daresay the strain of not saying it stiffened my face and glazed my eyes until I looked just about as stupid as I felt. How, I wondered, would Ma Merry react if I were to say just that?

As John Merry hung around the living-room at Hill Farm so could I hang around the kitchen at Cloud Farm. Long after the conversation about clothes was over I still hung around, hoping that Pa Merry would get up and go. In the end I was defeated—it was I who went.

Ma Merry followed me to the gate. "How are you liking it?" she asked confidentially.

"All right," I said, without enthusiasm.

She seemed a little disappointed. "Only all right? You're not overworked this time of the year, are you?" And when I did not reply, she went on, "Food none too good, eh?"

"The food's fine," I said quickly.

"Perhaps you're not used to this kind of work?"

I showed her my hands, which seemed to satisfy her. She cast about for any other reason for my lack of enthusiasm. I said abruptly, "Your John's about up there a good deal."

She took it unflinchingly. "Too true," she said thoughtfully, "too true." Then she came a little closer and almost whispered, "To tell the truth he's got a bit of a pash on Polly." The obsolete noun dated her pathetically.

"You don't say!" I exclaimed, and immediately felt a brute.

"Yes," she nodded sadly, "it's lonely for John, out here, with no one of his own age. Of course, he gets off to town when he has the time, he has his own little M.G. But I mean in his ordinary everyday life it's dull here. Still, I think things are going to be a little better. You're here and"—again she leaned towards me and whispered hoarsely—"we're getting a land girl. We ought to have had one long ago. I've been at Mr. Merry ever so long about it but he wouldn't give in. Said a land girl would cost money, but I said why, she'll pay for herself over and over again. She'll give John a hand with the milking machine and she'll take the hens off my hands altogether. So now we've got our name down on the list and when there's one available they'll send her along. Let's hope she's young and pretty."

She's got the right ideas, I thought, as I went up the path back to Hill Farm, she's no fool; and I felt a little comforted and stopped worrying for a few hours.

But only for a few hours.

. . . . .

At the end of the first week I got my first pay-packet, quite satisfactory. In the evening I went off down to the Red Letter to celebrate. I'm not a drinker, but I do like a celebration every now and then. And after all—I had something to celebrate, even if it was something I couldn't share with anyone. I wished the chief warden and the chaplain had been handy so that we could have forgathered to drink to the end of my first week on licence, my first week of good honest labour; but as they weren't I treated the man alongside me. Every time I raised my glass to him he responded with, "Your very good 'ealth!" alternating with, "'Ere's wishin' you all the very best!"

We had quite a little party in the corner of the tap-room, he and I. I thinking up all the exotic toasts I could muster—I make a small corner in toasts—and he responding untiringly, "Your very good 'ealth!" and, "'Ere's wishin' you all the very best!" To begin with he was serious and formal, and the more he drank the more correct and formal he became until

his solemn reiterations sounded like the responses in the Litany.

The pub keeper (he wasn't really a pub keeper, he worked for the Urban District Council and kept the pub in his spare time) was a paltry little man, haggard with anxiety and always anxious to get us out on time. He came round absolutely on the dot, collecting dirty glasses and whining, "Time, gents, time, gents," and no quarter given.

My pal and I were the last to leave, forced to go by the dirty looks we received. We drained our glasses and staggered out arm in arm. It was a superb evening with the sort of delicate mist you get in early spring, like the bloom on a Victoria plum. The moon was like a great orange wrapped in tissue paper. I felt constrained to quote some lines of "*Morte d'Arthur*", and did so whilst my companion stood beside me in a respectful hats-off-in-the-presence-of-death manner. When I had finished he said, "Ar, poytry," and, putting on his hat, he bade me good night and went off down the road, weaving slightly from side to side.

I have no doubt that I, too, weaved my way back to Hill Farm. My head is always the last to be affected by drink. My legs go first. On this occasion my head was perfectly clear, even now I can distinctly remember the very great care with which I closed the white gate to Hill Farm behind me. I remember thinking that if Ma Merry were looking out of the window now she would find it worth her while, I must have cut a curious figure wandering vaguely up the path under the misty orange moon. I should have gone straight in, past the yew tree and in at the front door into my own quarters, but for some reason or no reason the old bath attracted me. I went over to it, stumbling as I stubbed my toe against a stone, and stood looking down into it, hypnotized by the incessant drop, drip, drop of the dripping tap. I'll swear that I was not thinking of Polly nor of anyone else, I was simply enjoying myself. Musing, I walked round the bath and looked at the house. It was glamorous in the lovely half-darkness. Though I could not see the windows of the Edges' living-room, the lamp which Polly had evidently put in my little sitting-room caused the light to shine out through the window. It would make a pleasant

Christmas card, I remember thinking, the simple sampler-like front of the house, the little lighted window, the black straight yew tree like a toy Noah's Ark tree made of pieces of dyed sponge—and out from behind the said yew tree stepped John Merry. I'll swear, again, that I didn't feel any particular annoyance, I believe I even said, "What can ail thee, knight at arms, alone and palely loitering?" so I must have been feeling pleasant enough.

He got such a shock when I spoke that I could distinctly see him jump. To my intense surprise he was blubbering, like any school kid that's fallen and cut his knee. He made a hurried effort to hide it, but I said, "What the hell's wrong?" with some little disgust.

I waited until he had gulped once or twice. Staring up, I could distinctly see his throat working in his great long neck. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"And how old is Mrs. Edge?" I couldn't bring myself to say "Polly" to him.

"Twenty-eight."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," I said. "It's bad enough the way you hang around in the daytime, but snooping about behind trees after dark —" I paused, a horrid fear gripping me somewhere in the pit of my stomach. "You're not waiting for her, are you?"

"Oh no," he declared hurriedly, "nothing like that. Polly is pure." Polly is pure! It sounded so damn' silly, yet the relief was very great. I should have gone in and shut my front door and thanked God, fasting.

It is good for me, writing all this out. Over and over again I find myself writing "I should have." It is at least something that I can see now, when it is too late, where and when I went wrong. It is even something of a comfort to find that I have no one to blame but myself for what has happened.

Well, it is obvious that I should have gone indoors and left John Merry outside, blubbering like a school kid because there are no mince pies left for him.

I cannot explain the painful scene which followed, I simply record it faithfully.

"You mean you aren't lovers?" I said, smiling delightedly, I have no doubt.

"In a way we are," he said dubiously.

"What do you mean, 'in a way you are'?"

"Well——"

"Do you sleep together?"

He looked thoroughly shocked. "Of course not, how could we?"

How could they!

"But we love each other," he said.

"Nonsense. You're adolescent." I had a little trouble with the word, but I did manage it after a fashion. "You're about fourteen. How could you possibly expect a girl—Mrs. Edge—to *love* you? Ridiculous! Run home to bed, there's a good boy, you get on my nerves standing there snivelling."

That peeved him a bit. "Look out," he said; "you don't know what you're talking about. I tell you we love each other."

"You may think you love her," I pointed out, "but that doesn't make her in love with you."

"Doesn't it?" he returned angrily. "You're wrong! I know she loves me."

"Has she said so?"

He hesitated. He needn't have gone on talking to me about his love affair, but I guess it was the first time he had spoken of it to anyone. It was a relief, no doubt, and, what is more, it was something of which he was mighty proud. "She hasn't actually said so, but a fellow can tell all right from the way a girl kisses him."

Then I came all over queer, but not at all like the char-woman; I came all over my particular version of queer—I can't explain it.

I lashed out at him with all I'd got. If I'd been about two feet taller I reckon I'd have killed him; though I am below average height I have got a bit of brawn to me. I didn't play half-back for the old school with nothing. In a second we were having one of those scratching, punching, kicking, all-in fights that village boys have when they are roused. John Merry, I must say, was on the defensive. He kept shouting: "Hi, stop it, stop it! Hi, Sudley!"

The Edges came out of the living-room door and round the side of the house and tried to separate us, which wasn't difficult, for only one of us was angry, the other was only too pleased to have me dragged off. We both stood panting and pushing our hair back out of our eyes.

"What's it all about?" Edge said, looking from one to the other.

"Your new man's drunk," John Merry said, with some disgust.

My senses came back almost as quickly as they had left me. "Yes, I am," I said. I held out my hand to John Merry with a very manly gesture. "I apologize," I said, and there was nothing left for him to do but to take my hand and accept my apology.

I apologized all round, I really think I put myself back on the level. But when John Merry turned away there was a puzzled frown between his brows.

CHAPTER III

I HAVE always disliked the backsides of cows, the two great hip bones or whatever they are that stick up stark and gaunt, the loathsome tail-area, the coarse matted daglocks at the end of the tail, the protruding elbow-joints at the back of the legs, the wobbly ankles like women unused to very high heels, the mincing gait.

Early in the morning after my pathetic "celebration" I found them particularly ugly and obscene. There was no room for the whole herd in the cowshed, they had to be brought in to be milked one by one. As each one affectedly retired after my ministrations I let out a flying kick at its backside, thus relieving my feelings a great deal and causing the stupid animal to slip and slide in momentary panic and then turn its head and look at me with great soft reproachful eyes.

Fortunately, it was between kicks that Polly came into the barn; my head was pressed against the animal's hollow flank in corrupt affection and I was in a sort of mental coma pro-

duced by the rhythmic squirt *squirt*, squirt *squirt*, squirt *squirt* of the milk going into the pail.

"Oh, there you are!" she said, sort of shyly.

Where the hell else would I be?

"You're early!" I grunted.

"Yes, Eli isn't up yet," she vouchsafed. "Do tell me about last night."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Oh yes, there is. Eli seems quite satisfied. He seems to think it perfectly right and proper that you should come home drunk after receiving your pay-packet. He seems to think you've proved yourself to be a good labourer."

"He does, does he?"

"But I don't. I know you're not just a drunken labourer."

"Thanks."

"You didn't seem to me to be as drunk as all that."

"Oh?"

"In fact I didn't think you were drunk at all, just a little excited."

"Oh," I repeated, and all the while I didn't look up, I went on milking. Out of the corner of my eye I could see her feet and ankles. She wore fanciful red clogs and above them her ankles looked absurdly small—I could easily have encircled them with my thumb and forefinger. She went on standing there, saying nothing, and at length I took my hand off the beastly cow and, leaning down, I did exactly that.

"Look," I said, "I can get my finger and thumb round your ankle."

I looked up at her. She laughed. I laughed. I let go rather quickly like someone who has had a slight electric shock.

"All right," I said, "I'll tell you about last night. I found that young gallant of yours snivelling about in the shadows outside the house. Your curtains in your living-room weren't drawn, were they? No. He'd been staring in at you, like a poor boy looking in at the window of a toy-shop, longing for something he knows he can't have. I mean a poor boy old-style, there aren't any poor boys nowadays, of course. Yes, this young admirer of yours found himself so pathetic that, when

he turned away from the window, he was actually crying. Crying with desire for you."

What a curious girl she was; if one said that sort of thing to the average girl nowadays she would retort, "Says you!" Not so Polly—my Polly. She looked absolutely staggered.

"Polly," I said, shaking my head in bewilderment, "who are you? Where have you been all your life?"

After a momentary pause, during which she was framing the next question, she said, "Why were you knocking him about?"

I appreciated that; did it really look as though I were knocking him about?

"He made me angry." I must now state that I had no idea at all what I was going to say. I certainly had no intention of saying what I did say, it was neither the time (7 a.m.) nor the place for it. As it turned out I could hardly have improved on my tactics, she was one who (as a female novelist might put it) likes to be "taken by storm".

I said, "He told me that you loved him and when I asked him what made him think so he said by the way you kissed him."

I stopped milking now and swirling round on my stool I looked directly up at her. "And that made me angry. I suppose I was jealous, for I love you," and I added—I'm not proud of it, but I couldn't help adding—"and I'm not a pimply youth six years younger than you."

She stood there, bosom heaving (female novelist again).

Then she did exactly what one would expect, she turned and ran out of the cowshed in confusion and left me to my milking and my meditation.

Well, there I was, exactly thirty-seven-and-a-half miles nor'-nor'-west of London, almost in the middle of the twentieth century and the human beings around me might have walked straight out of *The Mill on the Floss*.

By the time the next cow simpered away from me I did not kick it, I felt a lot better.

Now, I thought, if I know my onions I will leave things alone for a few days. I won't follow up what's just happened, I'll let her think it over until she begins to wonder if it was all a dream. Later on, of course, when I was in it up to the neck,

I wasn't dispassionate at all. But right at the start that was the way my mind worked.

Whatever the other two might have thought of last night's performance I found that I had gone up a good deal in Eli Edge's estimation—he started hobbling out and having a crack with me about this and that. I asked him what the lengths of piping piled up against the ráilings in front of the house were for. That, he said, was what the council had left after they'd put in the water four years ago. I was surprised that they'd had main water only four years, but less so when I heard that to bring it up the green, as they called it, a special trench had had to be dug which had cost Eli thirty pounds, and as the piping had evidently been included in that sum they had left what was over for Eli's use. "It's just scrap," he said.

There was a well beside the kitchen door with a pump over it; until the council's water had been brought to the farm this well had been used daily, almost hourly, for the household. I had the idea of using the surplus piping to take water from the well across to the end of the barn that we called the cowshed. Eli was delighted. He had not wanted piping taken over to the farm when the water was put in because he would have had to pay extra water rate, but now that the idea of using his own water had been suggested he was all for it; it was essential, he declared, to have running water in the cowshed.

"Leave it to me," I said. "I'll get it fixed up. Got a pick anywhere?"

Well, one thing led to another and quickly there was a big scheme afoot to use an old zinc cistern he had lying about to store the water; the cistern could be filled up by pumping at the well and a tap could be turned on in the cowshed, on to which a hose could be fixed so that the cowshed could be swilled every day, as, indeed, it ought to have been all these years.

I gathered that when the Agricultural Board inspector called, "Polly dealt with him." Which would explain everything. Polly would hand out some of the late Mrs. Edge's home-made wine and the Agricultural Board inspector, murmuring sweet nothings about whitewash, would have a jolly time by the living-room fire entertained by Polly, and then discover that

there wasn't time to inspect the cows and the shed. He would drive off in his little car, full of good will, hers till the next time, just stopping himself from blowing valedictory kisses. Yes, I could see just how it was.

Well, when I had made my trench and laid my pipes and had a good healthy stream of water, I would take it upon myself to whitewash the cow end of the barn—I would even whitewash the cows' backsides; and when the Agricultural Board inspector next came I would insist upon his spending the duration of his visit in the cowshed, and Polly could keep her rhubarb wine until he had gone, and I would drink it instead.

That was how it would be.

I set to work with a will. You couldn't see me for dust.

I forgot to mention that Eli had rather a fine dog, not the sort of dog you would expect to see at Hill Farm at all. To the uninitiated it looked rather like a collie, with a great deal of long fluffy hair, a black nose, a black tongue and eyes the colour of lager beer. It was a valuable animal, a *keeshond* or Dutch barge-dog, and Eli had been given it by a woman who bred them because one of her dogs killed no less than four of Eli's fat capons. As a farm dog it was little use; Eli had no sheep, but I think he was proud to own it because he liked to be able to boast to people how much it was worth. It went by the distinguished name of Argo, which I gathered had not been Eli's choice; he merely called the dog "Boy" and was for ever clicking his fingers and calling, "Here, boy, here, there's a boy!"

He told me that he had possessed a fine sheep-dog but that just before the late Mrs. Edge had died the dog had been accidentally shot; he had come home limping on three legs with one paw almost severed, and Eli had taken his gun and shot him outright. There were tears in Eli's eyes when he told me. "He was a wonderful watchdog," he said; "there was a nasty bout of fowl-stealing in the county, gangs came overnight and took away dozens of birds at a time. Old Sam used to go frantic barking during the night; it was uncanny the way he heard every sound. I had a flap cut at the bottom of the back door so that he could get out under it quick during the night, and one night blow me if he didn't catch them at it. They were

that scared they bolted and left a sack behind. We never had no more trouble after that."

There was, in fact, a crude flap opening outwards only, at the bottom of the scullery door, but the dog Argo showed no inclination to use it; he followed Eli about all day long, his eyes mellow with love.

When I was digging my trench across the middle of the farmyard the young woman who had given the dog to Eli appeared with a *keeshond* bitch which she had brought to be mated. Eli came out and stumped across to the barn with the two animals whilst she came across to me.

"You're new, aren't you?" she asked; she seemed very much at home in the place. I told her I was. I could see Polly was looking out of the living-room window at us both, so I felt there was no point in being uncivil to the girl. In fact she was quite a decent sort in a noisy cheerful sort of way, I liked her. She lived in a village some seven miles away and bred dogs for a hobby. She was wearing smart riding-breeches and well-cut tweed jacket and she had a big generous mouth heavily emphasized with lipstick.

"You're a change from Eyvind," she told me. "Ever see him? He was a blond giant, a German, you know. Dumb as they make 'em but extraordinarily good-looking." Was he indeed? "I wonder why he left," she mused. I too wondered, but I wasn't going to start worrying about it.

Eli was away about half an hour, and the whole of that time she stood by me. I wasn't talking to her all the time but getting on with my work, she just stood staring in the way people do when they see "men working".

When it was time for her to go I could still see Polly glancing out of the window from time to time, so I thought it would do no harm if I were to escort the young woman down the green. She really was astonishingly friendly, and at that time I could do with any amount of friendliness.

On the way down to the gate she told me her name was Madge Clay and her address The Flagpole, Potter St. Mary. "It's a converted pub, fascinating," she said. "You should see it, Mr.—er——"

"Sudley, but call me George," I murmured automatically.

There was a whacking great green touring Lagonda backed up against the gate, and as she climbed in she said, "Now you will promise to come and see me sometime, won't you?" She didn't wait to hear whether I would or not, which was just as well as I hadn't an idea as to how I was to get there. She went on: "It's a pleasant surprise finding someone like you up at Hill Farm. You could have knocked me down with a feather."

An overstatement—she wouldn't need knocking down, she'd simply fall. Her animal jumped up on to the seat beside her and turned and grinned at me like anything. In fact they both grinned, the only difference in the smile being that one had a black tongue hanging out from which a few drops of saliva dripped on to the green leather of the car seat. I shut the car door on the two ladies and watched them drive off, then I turned briskly on my heel and went off up the green at the double; one thing I wasn't going to do, and that was to share the joke with Mrs. Merry.

. . . . .

The first part of the pipe-laying job went rapidly and without a hitch. Then there was a hold-up for spare parts. Someone would have to go to the builders' merchants in the town for joints and unions. Eli Edge was still having a good deal of pain from his sciatica, he couldn't go. So it had to be me. I borrowed Eli's bicycle to go into Lambing where I had to park it at the pub and wait for the bus. Then in the town, my shopping done, I had to hang around for some time before the bus back through Lambing was due, and this meant having a meal there. In all I spent the best part of a day on a job which, with a car, would not have taken more than two hours in all. That night when I took round my empty tray after supper I saw Eli in the kitchen and said as much.

"Motor-car!" Eli exclaimed much as though I had suggested his keeping a tame camel. He chuckled mightily. "No, not for the likes of me and Polly."

It was a curious point of view.

"Look at the time you'd save," I persisted, "and time is money these days."

"Bless you, no, I wouldn't save time with a car," Eli

retorted. "I don't go into the town at all unless there's something special I want, like you did today. And I go to Bedford market twice a year, not more. What would be the use of a motor-car to us?"

That was just the point, I told him if they had a motor-car they would get out more; Polly could learn to drive and then she and Eli could go about a bit, get a bit of fun. It was quiet for them both up at Hill Farm, it would do them good to get out and about a bit.

Eli was astonished. Why would anyone want to get out and about? Hadn't they everything they wanted at Hill Farm?

It was no good arguing. I merely said two things which I thought trenchant and left it at that: one was that I had seen a second-hand Land Rover for sale in a garage in the town and that I considered it a snip, and the other was that I could teach him to drive. Polly was fiddling about in a cupboard, she didn't appear to be listening but I knew very well she heard. I retreated to my own quarters.

I wondered a good deal about John Merry; I didn't kid myself that our little set-to had frightened him off or anything of the kind, but the fact remained that for five days afterwards I had not seen him at all.

What I was certain about was that Polly was no longer indifferent to me; she may have liked me more or she may have liked me less, but she was no longer merely uninterested. I, on the other hand, never looked at her. With a great show of unconcern I took my trays from her hands without so much as glancing at her face. I had long discussions with Eli, standing in the yard, in front of the windows, without a look in her direction, though I knew perfectly well she was watching us.

The doctor called twice a week or so to see Eli. They evidently knew when he was to be expected, for Eli would put his teeth in for the occasion.

One day after the doctor's visit he came stumping out of the living-room into the yard and said, "That motor-car you mentioned, Sudley."

"Land Rover. It is a sort of jeep affair. The only thing you could drive up the green, in fact."

"Where would we keep it?"

"There would just be room in the barn at the moment, but I wouldn't know about later on, after the harvest."

"You think we could get it into the barn, do you?"

I did, and again I pressed the point that no other car could be driven up the driveway, or pathway, or whatever they liked to call it, up over the green. Though I did not say so it was quite obvious that the drive ought to have been attended to long ago, the ruts which were made in the past by the milk-lorry, which had now given up coming up to the house, were a foot deep in places. No ordinary car could get up to the house nor did anyone ever attempt it; the laundry was left with Mrs. Merry and carried up to Hill Farm by the obliging John, the newspapers were left stuck between two slats in the gate.

"You'd be able to drive this Land Rover, as you call it, up, would you?"

"They can be driven over ploughed fields," I told him.

"Fancy!" he exclaimed, and returned to the house.

It took him several more days to make up his mind, and at last he said we'd better get the thing. The doctor had told him he would have to take it easy for a bit, and even though they didn't go out much it would be nice, when they did go out, to do it in style.

I said I didn't know about style, but he went on, saying that all the neighbours had cars, the Merrys even had two; when all was said and done he could afford it.

I bet he could.

"Polly's keen," he said, as a final reason in the Land Rover's favour.

Finally I went down to the 'phone-box outside the Red Letter and 'phoned the garage in town, the name of which I had noted. They sent out the Land Rover for us to inspect, and after a long pause and a careful review of the whole situation, Eli bought it, paying for it with banknotes.

I wondered for a moment whether there would be any difficulty about my getting a new driving licence, but there wasn't. As soon as it arrived I volunteered to give Eli a driving lesson. He didn't take easily to it, his leg was stiff and painful and he fumbled a bit over the gears, nevertheless he seemed

quite keen. "But Polly must learn too," he said—I think he rather fancied himself being driven about by Polly—"then we'll go off visiting on Sunday afternoons," he chuckled.

So he really meant that Polly should be taught to drive. I wasn't sure that I wanted to be alone with Polly at this particular stage in our relationship. I said this and that about women drivers and he laughed. I even went on to say that anyone as good-looking as Polly, with due respect, would certainly be pretty ham-fisted at the wheel (a *non sequitur*, but it suited my purpose) and he laughed again. In the end it really came to his pleading with me to teach Polly to drive. If he had ever had the slightest worry about the relationships of Polly and myself I was sure that it was wiped from his mind completely during that discussion. Very reluctantly, and only as a great favour to him, I agreed to give Polly driving lessons; but I added verisimilitude to my reluctance almost at once by stating that I must finish my pipe-laying job first.

It all rather sounds as though one were playing at being in love, and, thinking it all over in retrospect, that is just what I was doing—playing at being in love. In view of what was to come, I suppose my behaviour and feelings were comparable to the early stages of an illness when one is merely "brewing".

I set to work with energy to finish the job. When I had got all the pipes laid and re-covered with farmyard, the cistern and taps in place, I had a bit of bother with the well; it was an exceptionally deep one, and the pump had not been used for four years. The brickwork was in poor condition round the top. I could have put it right in a jiffy and told Eli so. But to my surprise he wouldn't let me. No, he said, I wasn't insured, and if anything happened to me it wouldn't do him any good. He, Eli, would get the proper well-builder to come along and do it. "They say that well's bottomless," Eli said with a toothless grin. "It used to be said in the village that me grandmother put her unwanted kids down there. Hee, hee!"

"But it's drinking-water!" I protested, revolted.

Eli laughed heartily; he, too, had a sense of humour, but it was peculiar to himself.

I looked down the well, the round water at the bottom looked no bigger than a saucer; I said so.

"That's nothing," Eli said. "You get wells so deep that the water doesn't look no bigger than half a crown."

The well-builder came and, after commenting that his own great-grandfather had built the well, he set to work repairing the brickwork at the top and vouchsafed nothing more.

In due course I got the pump going, and all the joints tightened up and the cistern filled and a good stream of water pouring over the floor of the cowshed.

Eli was delighted. He gave me a great slap on the shoulder.

"By gum, you're a good lad, George! I don't mind saying it was a lucky day for us you dropped in, and I'm not one to flatter, as Polly will tell you."

I've often thought over those words of poor old Eli's recently; he, too, was a good lad. Like the rest of us—he made mistakes.

"Now then, now for Polly's driving lessons. A nice reward!"

To whom? To me? Or to Polly?

I don't know what he meant.

CHAPTER IV

ELI made no comment on John Merry's non-appearance at Hill Farm and I couldn't make out what Polly thought about it, but after five days I decided I had better call at Cloud Farm and make my peace; there was no point in making enemies right at the start. I chose an evening after supper when I thought John would be there. I was a little uncertain of my reception, but Mrs. Merry seemed delighted—she took me into the living-room and opened a bottle of beer for me. John was out, he had taken his father to a political meeting in his M.G. "And the land girl's gone to bed, poor little thing!"

"So she's arrived."

"Day before yesterday." Mrs. Merry's face clouded slightly, and I knew that before long she would have poured out whatever was on her mind. But first we had a light gossipy talk about things that interested her, mainly about what was happening at Hill Farm. In a very short time we got on to the

subject of John, and she said shyly: "I heard about your little scrap and I must say I wasn't sorry; what I am sorry about is John making a fool of himself over a married woman. You see, it's lonely here, there's nobody for a kid of John's age——"

"No need to excuse him," I interrupted; "there's nothing wrong with your John." She beamed, but only momentarily.

"I'm afraid he's got it badly," she said, her face clouding again. "He's crazy about Polly. It's not fair, Polly's got more than her share of everything. When Polly is about, no man looks at any other woman. Mind you, I like Polly, don't get the wrong impression. She's all right, is Polly, she can't help her looks. I don't think she'd play fast and loose with anyone."

Play fast and loose? I wouldn't know.

"Now this little Mary Tiffin. She's a nice enough little thing, but what chances has she got against Polly Edge?"

"Great Scott! Polly Edge is a married woman, John won't get very far with her!" I was convinced by now that they hadn't gone very far, but I realized that John was in a tiresome condition, tiresome, that is, for other people, i.e. myself and Ma Merry; he had dedicated himself to worship of Polly. Our evening scuffle in the shrubbery, I realized all too well, had done no good at all other than scare him off temporarily.

I said, "He's a fine lad is your John, we can't go letting him make a fool of himself. We must do what we can."

"But what? I've done all I can."

I knew she had; I knew now why she had detained me on a silly pretext outside the farm the day I went for the interview with Eli. She guessed that when I saw Polly I might be keen to have the job, and she thought another man about the place wouldn't do any harm. Under her bewildering variety of hats Ma Merry certainly kept a small compact parcel of brains.

"It's so disappointing about this little Mary Tiffin," she went on. "I suggested to John that he should take her along too tonight; he couldn't have looked more surprised if I had suggested his taking one of the cows."

"John's eyes must be opened to Mary Tiffin," I pronounced. "I'll have to see what I can do."

She had quite a steady eye. She eyed me, and I looked

steadily back at her, and that long look was a pledge, like a handshake. She was all right, was Ma Merry.

. . . . .

I gave Polly her first driving lesson, strictly impersonal. It was easy to be impersonal, I couldn't get over the fact that I was driving along a country lane with this gorgeous piece beside me; for the moment I didn't require anything more. I kept glancing sideways at her face and tearing my gaze away, back to the road. It was the same with the second lesson, the next day. Strictly impersonal, we talked about nothing but gears, brake and clutch.

The third day I was teaching her to reverse when we came to a sudden stop, backed into a small lane. The engine stalled. I don't know why, but we both did nothing. We sat perfectly still. It was dead quiet for once. You could almost hear things growing, the primroses were positively glaring out of the hedgerows at us. I turned my head and caught her looking at me; something had to be said, so I grabbed hold of her hand. "What a hand!" I said. "It's like a nutmeg grater. You work very hard, Polly, without anything much to show for it. Look at your little hand." I looked at it for a long time, and I couldn't give it back to her without kissing it.

"And you're a foul cook," I went on, starting up the engine.

"It's that beastly oil-stove, I can't manage it."

"No, of course you can't."

"There's no gas within miles, and no electricity. I've just got to put up with it."

"No need to," I said. "Lots of people use gas-stoves supplied from cylinders of compressed gas. It's just like an ordinary gas-stove; they call with freshly charged cylinders every fortnight or so."

"I've heard of it," Polly said. "In fact I once talked about it to Eli. He doesn't want one, they've always used oil. The late Mrs. Edge was a beautiful cook, she used the very stove I use now."

"To hell with the late Mrs. Edge," I said energetically, "if she's not already there! I'll see Eli gets you a gas-stove."

"You don't know Eli," she said sadly. "Look what he's already spent on this Land Rover. You'll never get him to buy a gas-stove."

"Eli doesn't know what he is worth. All the war years, and the years since, he's been making money and putting it away. Some of it in the bank, I daresay, but I bet there's a good deal of it in a stocking or under his mattress."

Polly smiled but said nothing.

"I've broken the crust of his penury, Polly. I'll dig right into the pie and bring out some plums, you see if I don't."

"I don't think you will," she said, "but you can try. I wouldn't have believed that anyone could get him to do what he has done in the short time since you came, so you may be successful in getting him to spend even more money. I'll be surprised if you do."

"Now we must get back and Eli must have his driving lesson. I wonder which of you will be the first to pass the driving test."

"Eli's never going in for his driving test?"

"Why not! He's keen to; but he's slower than you, of course."

She seemed thunderstruck. We drove home without another word.

I couldn't broach the subject during Eli's driving lesson; he put all he had into it, puffing and hissing his breath out, grunting with satisfaction when he got the gear in and tut-tutting with dismay when he missed it. He couldn't manage to drive back up the green, so at the gate we changed places and I drove up to the yard.

Before we got out he made the thing easy for me by saying: "I am glad to see you're settling down nicely with us. Everything comfortable in your quarters?"

Oh yes, I said, everything was comfortable, rooms nice and all that sort of thing. It was the food——

"I know, I know. Poor Polly! I won't say the girl doesn't try, she does; it's just that she doesn't have it in her. Now the late Mrs. Edge——"

I broke into what he had to say about the late Mrs. Edge with my suggestion. How about a gas cooker which manufactured its own butane gas?

Oh no, Eli said, none of your new-fangled gadgets for him; what was good enough for the late Mrs. Edge ought to be good enough for Polly.

I told him Polly was a wife in a thousand; there wasn't, in fact, one girl in a million who would do what Polly did with as little grumbling. It was different, I pointed out, for a woman who had been born to the hard life, brought up to bail hot water out of the copper for washing, to blacken her hands trimming the wicks of lamps and cooking-stoves, but Polly was young enough to belong to the "kitchenette age", the age of plastics and stainless steel. "How she puts up with it so uncomplainingly I don't know," I declared.

Eli listened to me civilly enough, but he was curt when he slammed the Rover door and stumped across the yard to his door.

I was afraid I had gone too far.

But I hadn't. Next evening when I was milking he ambled into the shed and started right away talking about butane gas cookers. How much did I reckon they cost? Did they have to be ordered ahead or could one get a cooker any time? What would be the cost of upkeep? Would the van call regularly with freshly charged cylinders and so on?

It was Saturday night. We decided that on Monday we would go into town and have a look at the gas-stoves.

Yes, things were moving pretty rapidly at Hill Farm.

Remembering my unspoken pledge to my friend Ma Merry I tidied myself up after supper, putting on my best, my second best and my third best; the grey herring-bone suit and a new salmon-pink tie which I thought of as "Old Parkhurst". I delayed taking my tray round the side until I had changed. Polly looked thoroughly startled. "Going out?" she exclaimed; she was holding a large black frying-pan and there was a black smudge on the side of her nose. Resisting the impulse to kiss said smudge, I simply smirked and went.

I found the land girl and Ma Merry listening to Music Hall on the radio. John was not in the room, I hoped he was not out, otherwise my visit might be wasted. But trust Ma Merry. "Oh, here's George Sudley!" she cried, loud enough for the whole district to hear. She went ranging round the farm

buildings shouting it until John emerged from some place where he had been lurking and was bidden to fetch beer from the cellar for us. From the way she was going on I might have been John's best friend. When he brought the beer and the glasses I said:

"No, please don't bother. As a matter of fact I called to see if Miss Tiffin would honour me with a bit of a stroll, and we might call in at the Red Letter."

I am sure the little land girl was absolutely astonished; so far I had only waved to her, from my point of vantage in the farmyard at Hill Farm, and she on the tractor in the Merrys' adjoining field. However, she seemed perfectly willing and ran upstairs to get her coat. There was an awkward couple of minutes with Ma Merry, John and myself alone in the living-room with the tray of drinks, Ma Merry over-bright and the whole thing looking, to me, very like the put-up job it was. However, Ma Merry, with the aid of Music Hall, carried it off all right. The little Tiffin came downstairs looking a different girl; it wasn't a matter of powder and lipstick, it was just the difference between a wanted woman and an unwanted one. John looked at her as though he had just noticed her, and before we left the room I managed to get in a colossal wink at Ma Merry.

We didn't go to the Red Letter, it was too near, we should have been back too soon. We strolled into Lambing and had a drink at the pub there, played darts, at which the little Tiffin was a good hand, and strolled slowly back. By the time we were back at Cloud I knew about as much as you would have expected there was to know about the Tiffins—Pa, Ma, Big Sister, Little Brother, cousins, aunties, dog and cat. We stood leaning over the gate a long time before we parted. She was talking in a low voice and we might have been engaged in what I am sure Ma Merry would call "spooning", but as a matter of fact I was hearing all about Big Sister's first-born. If John Merry was the starer-out-of-windows that his mother was, I considered the evening's work was not wasted.

Apart from John Merry's affairs, I had furthered my own cause that evening. When I got into my own sitting-room I picked up a newspaper and glanced at it before turning in.

There was a knock at the door. It was Polly. This was the first time she had been into my quarters when I was there.

"Oh," she said, with a slight jump, "I just wondered if you were back. I see you are."

I didn't argue the point. I don't know what I looked - insolent, smug or what. As a matter of fact I think I was simply gaping; I couldn't carry Polly's loveliness about with me, it hit me anew every time I set eyes on her.

"Well er—good night, then," she said, very softly, and closed the door. Listening, I heard her bolt the door between my quarters and the Edges' living-room and the sound seemed to put me in my place.

CHAPTER V

THINGS were certainly moving if at an uneven pace. Eli Edge's store of pound notes seemed to be flying in all directions and my love affair with Polly was advancing at a snail's pace but surely. I wasn't in any hurry about Polly, I had a sort of feeling that this was to be the love of a lifetime and I was prepared to wait until Polly felt the same, to wait and wait, if necessary. I knew all about waiting; one thing I have learned in the last few years is patience. I'll never forget those first months at Parkhurst when, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the day's work over, I realized that I had the whole evening to spend alone in my cell, the allowance of library books read and re-read, no one to talk to, nothing to do, no room, even, to move up and down. It would have been easier to go shrieking mad then and there than to control myself, to face the fact that I had dozens, scores, hundreds of such evenings ahead. But having controlled myself, having learned, little by little, how to pass the time, how to be reasonably happy, how still to see the funny side of life—well, I found I certainly had done myself a spot of good. So now time never bothers me, I know how to wait. The trouble at this moment is that my time is running out much too fast.

Well, we got the "Butygas" cooker, a splendid affair of

white enamel and chromium. It looked absurd standing beside the old copper on the brick floor in the scullery.

"Oh, Eli," Polly cried, "can't we have it in the living-room?"

"By all means," Eli chuckled. The living-room was, in fact, the old farm kitchen; long ago the range had been removed and an open fire grate put in its place. The late Mrs. Edge had used the scullery as her kitchen with the copper, oil-stove and sink all under one black ceiling. Eli was delighted to return to the old order with the cooking going on all round him as it had been in his mother's day. There was a certain amount of chaff between Polly and Eli, Polly remarking that now Eli would be able to keep an eye on things and Eli saying yes, he'd keep an eye on things all right, meaning, I suppose, Polly's legs or something of that sort. I left them to it.

So the new gas cooker was installed in a corner of the living-room beside the old oak dresser. It looked like a wedding cake, a glaring white in the corner of the dark room.

"What you want now," I said later to Polly, "is one of those new cooking-cabinets. You could have it put beside the stove so that you have got everything to hand and don't have to go trapesing in and out of the scullery. There's a nice enamel flap lets down for making pastry——"

"Be careful, George. Don't go too far. You don't know Eli."

"Don't I? I think he's been extraordinarily decent about everything so far. He's forked out over five hundred pounds on luxuries in the four weeks I've been here."

"He has, but it won't go on. It's a novelty and it'll wear off. In fact I'd say we'd just about had it now. Do be careful. Eli's very good-natured and it takes a lot to rouse him. But when he does lose his temper . . . !"

"Is this a warning? I don't know why you should take it upon yourself to warn me, Polly. So far I've only caused Eli to spend money for his own good."

She sighed and repeated: "You don't know Eli. I shall never understand him."

It was during a driving lesson. I sat back and looked at Polly. She was so near to me, there was a current between us that was switched on, as it were. I could so easily have caused

her to stop the car and taken her into my arms, and only the most absurd reasons prevented me from doing so. Perhaps it will be disappointing, I thought. I remember also the deadly tag flashing through my mind, "It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive." No doubt there is a certain amount of the ascetic in my make-up; perhaps my father—but I shall never know.

It was obvious that something had to happen to precipitate Polly into my arms, otherwise I might have gone on for months like one of those peculiar children -rare, I admit—who postpone the pleasure of eating a box of chocolates because when it is eaten they have, so to speak, had it!

It did not occur to me that once I had had Polly in my arms nothing would ever be the same again.

Eli was always there, his sciatica was still bad at times, and he lay about a good deal on the mud-coloured moquette with a cat or two in his arms.

The evening meal at the farm was tea and supper combined, it was eaten about six o'clock, after which Eli invariably had a sleep, waking refreshed about nine o'clock to listen to the news and to drink a cup of cocoa and have a smoke before bedtime.

"Doesn't he ever go out?" I asked Polly.

"Yes, twice a year he goes to Bedford market, once to the harvest festival, once to the gymkhana they have every year at Lambing on Piper's field, and to chapel at Christmas and Easter."

"What about the barber?"

It seemed that the old man who tottered up every week to attend to certain tasks connected with the "little hut" (i.e. the outside lavatory) dealt with Eli's hair when necessary.

"My God!" I exclaimed. "Polly, how do you stick it?"

She looked away quickly. "Stick it? It's my home, my life. I love it."

I might have made the obvious comment, "Says you!" but I didn't. I walked away. Somehow or other I felt the thing was too serious.

Sunday turned out to be a beautiful spring day. During the morning I toyed with the idea of taking the little Tiffin

out in the afternoon. But after the midday meal, when I had looked at the newspaper, I stretched myself and stood at the window, making up my mind. I saw a great tall chap wearing a beret walking up the green from the gate. I thought for a moment it was John Merry, but this fellow had a much better physique. As he passed my window I could see he was the regular film star type, cleft chin and all the rest of it. I kept an eye on the window, and after half an hour or so I saw him re-pass, going down the green, but this time he had Polly, carrying a tatty little basket, with him. I watched them out of the gates and then I hurried round to see what on earth Eli was up to. I didn't put it quite so crudely; I made the excuse that I'd like to swap newspapers if Eli had finished reading his.

"Chap that was here before you has just been," he volunteered. "Eyvind, the German. You'll never guess what he wanted."

Wouldn't I?

"He's applied for British nationality. He wants to become a naturalized Englishman. Hee-hee! He brought along a paper for me to sign. I had to say I found him honest and all that."

"Did you sign it?"

"Yes, no reason against it. He worked quite well."

"Why did he leave?"

"Why? Need you ask? He wanted more money; he's getting twice what I was paying him in a factory in the town."

I asked him where Polly was off to; it was no business of mine, I suppose, but he did not seem to resent it. "Primrosing," he said.

Primrosing! That was one name for it, primrosing! I thought Eli a fool, but he was not, I have since discovered, the fool I thought him.

"Polly's got an old grandmother," Eli said. "She lives in one of the almshouses in the town. She's getting Eyvind to take a basket to her with eggs and butter, and they've gone to pick primroses to cover up the produce."

I felt slightly affronted that I had not known about Polly's grandmother, but unreasonably, of course; there were yet a great many things I did not know about Polly. There were, too, still things I did not know about myself. I did not know,

for instance, that I could behave in such a childishly jealous way. I said I would go with them "primrosing".

"Do," Eli said; he was already immersed in my newspaper. "Do. And take Argo with you, he could do with a walk."

I soon caught them up. Polly told me afterwards that I behaved abominably and I have no doubt that I did. There was something about Eyvind that made me want to take a rise out of him. He was one hundred per cent Teuton, full of ready laughter but entirely humourless; I don't suppose, however, that that was why I wanted to kick him.

We went down on to the marsh and Polly picked big golden kingcups. The birds were hysterical with spring feeling, a snipe was drumming and the sky was a pale misty blue. I suppose I, too, was slightly hysterical. Eyvind spoke very bad English; he had a thick guttural accent so that when he was speaking English it might well have been German heard from a short distance away. I asked him if he really thought that he would ever pass as an Englishman. I goaded him, in fact, in a way of which I am heartily ashamed, saying things which I should hate to repeat. In the end the poor fellow, wondering why his day had gone bad on him, I have no doubt, trudged off towards Lambing to catch his bus, carrying the silly little basket of offerings which Polly was sending, like Red Riding Hood, to her grandmother.

"Good-bye, Eyvind," she called after him, "and come again soon, won't you?" Then she turned on me. "How beastly you were! What made you tease him like that? I think you're a cad. Come on, Argo."

Eyvind was still walking away from us, towards the village, Polly could hardly overtake him. She went off up a slope towards a little larch copse that was just beginning to show a delicate green. It was not wholly in the direction of Hill Farm. Argo gave me a look as much as to say, "Well, you are a fool!" and followed her.

I was a fool; I felt one and I looked one, standing there with all the mating birds around me laughing their heads off.

I caught up Polly, she was just on the edge of the larch copse. I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her round and told her I was a fool and that it was all because I loved her.

Then we kissed and, believe me, it wasn't an ordinary kiss.

We went into the larch copse and kissed again.

Then we sat down, side by side on the ground, hand in hand. I believe we were incandescent, I believe that anyone finding us there would have stepped back from the great light that shone from us. For the moment there was nothing else we wanted but to sit there, hand in hand, we were translated. Argo sat a respectful distance away and grinned like anything.

In prison I made up a rather foul little jingle called, "It's lovely, love!" I didn't think of it then, but I do now and with those nasty tinny words rattling about in my head as I write I can still say that our love really was lovely, and know that it is true.

It wasn't what it seemed: a married woman, a convict on licence, a kiss. It was two people who had never really been in love before, finding each other, by mere chance, and discovering that each was part of the other, that together they were a whole. I suppose we were both too old for that breath-taking youthful kind of love, perhaps we were both suffering from arrested development. Maybe that kind of love doesn't happen to everybody and in experiencing it I am one of the lucky ones.

Or am I?

Polly wept a little, I don't know why she wept, but I guess it was for happiness. She sat looking at me with water gushing up into her eyes, and welling over the edge, along her lower lashes and on to her cheek and down her cheek and on to her white blouse. She made no attempt to stop the tears. "I'm so happy," she kept whispering, "I'm so happy."

Then I dried her tears and we got up and brushed the old larch needles off. Walking back over the marsh we said nothing, we did not touch hands. I laughed at the mating birds: you don't know a thing, I thought, not a thing!

A long time afterwards Ma Merry, who believed in Romance with a capital R, said to me: "Of course I knew all about you and Polly. I guessed it one Sunday afternoon in the spring. You were walking up the lane with her. If an atom bomb had dropped in the lane I don't think either of you would have noticed, you looked like you was sleep-walking!"

I left Polly outside the farm, I didn't want to see her again that day, I wanted to be alone. There was nothing in our love

then but glory and I wanted to steep myself in it. I went for a very long walk alone. I had some bread and cheese and some beer for my supper in a pub, and by the time I got back it was after ten o'clock. Polly had left the lamp lighted in my room. As I got ready for the night I hummed, I remember. I was still, evidently, in a world entirely my own; I hadn't begun to think that presently Mr. and Mrs. Edge would retire to their room. The squalor had not set in.

But it was not very long before it did.

Polly came out to the cowshed early in the morning when I was milking. She was wearing her red clogs again. She said, "George, it is wrong for me to sleep with Eli now that we love each other."

Now steady, I thought, keep calm. What is all this?

I went on milking.

"Say something, George."

I said, "Sit down a minute," and pushed another milking-stool towards her with my foot. "Tell me, Polly, have you any brothers and sisters?"

"No."

"Father and mother?"

"Yes. They are quite old. Father was head gardener to the Earl of Worcester. He's retired now, he gets bad rheumatism."

"Go on."

"Father and Mother live in a cottage on the estate the other side of Northampton, it's about forty miles away from here. It will be nice to go and see them in the Land Rover. I don't often go because it takes nearly the whole day to get there, cross-country on buses."

"How did you come to meet Eli?"

Polly smiled. "It was funny, that . . ." She continued to smile thoughtfully.

"No doubt," I said; "very funny. If you don't mind my saying so, your marriage is an extremely odd one."

"Odd! There's nothing odd about it. Eli and Dad get on like a house on fire."

"An excellent reason for marriage," I snapped.

Polly looked grieved. "You're too smart for me, George Sudley. I don't like it when you talk clever."

"Sorry. Tell me, Polly, about how you met Eli."

"At Clacton," she said, and went on hurriedly: "It was like this. We, Dad and Mum that is, live only four miles out of town. I left the village school when I was eleven and went to the High School every day on the bus. Then, when I got my certificate, I took a business course and got a job with a firm of auctioneers. It was a good salary and I saved quite a bit. I took some nice holidays, three friends and me, girl friends. France, Switzerland, and one year we went to Germany, the Black Forest."

"How did you avoid getting married, Polly?"

"No one I liked asked me."

"I bet that plenty you didn't like did!"

She ignored that. "Well, after I gallivanted about a bit I thought it was time Mum and Dad had a bit of a break. They'd never had a holiday, not since their honeymoon. They'd spent three days at Clacton for their honeymoon about thirty-five years ago, and so they wanted to go back to Clacton, and back we went, for a fortnight."

"Don't tell me you met Eli in Clacton?"

She nodded. "We did. He was in the same hotel. Mrs. Edge had been dead ten months or so and odd women from the village had been coming in for a few hours at a time, doing bits of cooking for him. Eli was miserable, I can tell you. He took a fortnight off, and left Eyvind in charge."

He went to Clacton wife-hunting, of course. What a pity he didn't pick something more suitable!

"Eli and Dad got on fine together," Polly told me. "Mum liked him, too. A day or so before the holiday was over he—he——"

"Popped the question," I said and gave the cow I had just finished a hearty slap. I took my pail across the yard and emptied it over the cooler on the side of the house by the kitchen door and when I came back into the shed Polly was still sitting, huddled on the little stool, thoughtful.

I started on the next cow.

Polly said, still thoughtful: "It didn't seem wrong, not at the time it seemed right. Eli was . . . I know it sounds silly, but he seemed such a man compared with all the boys I knew. Mum and Dad were pleased; oh, they were pleased."

"So you married Eli and became mistress of Hill Farm, and still the boys fall in love with you, John Merry and the youth Eyvind and heaven knows who else. Eli doesn't seem to mind. And you like it."

I knew that wasn't quite fair.

"There's never been anything serious," Polly said and added, "until now."

I could see it all quite clearly. I could even visualize Mum and Dad; the arrival of Polly, in their middle age, was one of those freaks Nature produces so wittily from time to time.

I could also see quite clearly that, as an American might put it, I had gotten myself a bellyful. I could see myself having to meet Mum and Dad. Mum would hurriedly wipe her hands on her apron before shaking hands with me, she might even drop a curtsy. Dad would lead me out into his garden plot and discuss the merits or demerits of his runner beans; they would both still look at Polly as though they just couldn't believe it; believe, I mean, that she had leaped from their combined loins. Nor would I be able to believe it.

Fate, that had seemed kind yesterday afternoon in the larch copse on the marsh, now seemed bitterly cruel. Why couldn't Polly and I have met before? I, too, had had a holiday in the Black Forest; perhaps Polly and I had been there at the same time. We might have met when I was the most desirable of future husbands for Polly. But we didn't. We had come together now when, I have no doubt, Mum and Dad would prefer to bury their Polly.

I stopped milking. "Well, look. We'll have to go to Eli and tell him. We'll have to say 'Polly and I love each other. We are going to go away together and you'll have to lump it.' No, that won't do, of course. We'll just have to go, Polly. And you can write a little note to Eli and say you're terribly sorry and all that——"

"I couldn't possibly," Polly said; she didn't so much say it as breathe it.

"Well then, we'll have to stay as we are and you'll have to creep out of your bedroom when Eli is asleep and come down to me."

It was cruel of me to say that; I felt cruel.

"Don't talk like that," she said quickly. "I could hate you when you talk like that."

"Why can't you run away with me, Polly?"

"I couldn't," she said. "Eli would never get over it. And Mum and Dad——"

The possible reactions of Mum and Dad rendered her speechless.

"You'll kill yourself with kindness, Polly. You're too kind to hurt Eli, you're too kind to hurt your mother and father. I wonder if you're too kind to hurt me."

"You are me," she said simply.

"Well, there you are," I said.

There was a long pause.

"I wouldn't mind coming down to you at night, George, but how could I go back to bed, beside Eli?"

How indeed? We were right back to where we started.

"This is where you came in," I said.

CHAPTER VI

ALL that was at seven o'clock in the morning, a time of day at which I find it easy to be free from emotion. By seven o'clock at night I felt very different; I had neither the inclination nor the ability to talk things over quietly; there was only one thing I felt I had to do and that was to kiss her again. When I went for my evening tray she did not look at me at all.

I glanced in at their living-room window on my way back with my empty tray. Eli lay on the sofa covered, as usual, with cats. He was asleep. I went into the scullery and, putting my tray down, I turned Polly round by the shoulders and kissed her. The door from the scullery through into the living-room ajar, we were well out of Eli's range. Had he been awake, he could not have seen us. I think I took Polly by surprise, but she didn't take long to adjust herself to it. She kissed with her whole self, melting into me.

I suppose I heard the step outside, but it was not the sort of kiss which can be undone within the instant. I suppose the intruder could comfortably have counted up to eight before we drew apart. I don't know how Polly felt, but I, still standing in the glory of that kiss, looked up, blinking, at the tower of indignation that was John Merry.

One of the minor delights of Polly's kisses is that they were clean. She may or may not have used lipstick, I wouldn't know, but she didn't use much, and if she did it never came off. I have always carried away most of the kisses I have known on my pocket handkerchief, but I didn't have to wipe that kiss of Polly's off my mouth, it was inscribed instead on my memory, and if I had lived to be a very old man I would have remembered that kiss in the after years.

So I wasn't embarrassed by having to dab awkwardly at my mouth. I grinned up at John Merry, not because I had usurped him but because I was so darn happy. He ignored me. "Polly," he said, "have you forgotten the whist drive?"

The whist drive! The community of Lambing, with its satellite villages, were always having social evenings; they were collecting money to extend their village hall to a size which would permit of their having dances and cinema shows.

Polly dragged herself together quite neatly. No, she hadn't forgotten the whist drive; she had, indeed, promised to help with the refreshments this time. "Just give me a minute," she said, and skipped out, leaving the two of us standing in the scullery feeling extremely uncomfortable.

My journey from the sublime to the goddammit having taken place in the minimum of time, I said, "Come and let me show you the new gas-stove."

Eli, pretending he had not been asleep, acknowledged his presence with a wave. I never barged unasked into the Edges' living-room, but this time I murmured an excuse about showing off the new gadget.

Merry seemed mildly interested. "Some people at Lambing have their caravan fitted with one of these," he said; "it's not nearly so big, nor so posh."

"It's the latest model," Eli put in from his sofa; "the last word. Nothing but the best will do for our George."

Merry poked and peered for a minute or two. "I've always understood these sort of stoves were dangerous," he said.

"Dangerous!" from Eli.

"The gas, the butane that is, doesn't smell. You wouldn't know if you were being gassed. You wouldn't smell it like you would ordinary coal gas."

"Nonsense!" I put in quickly. "It's as safe as houses provided you're careful. They warned us about being careful. There's a safety tap here, just beside the cylinder. Polly turns that off each time she's finished cooking in case one of the taps gets knocked on by mistake."

"In case the cat turns one on," Eli put in jovially. "He's a caution, John, is this here Sudley. Look at the money he's made me spend since he came. By gum! He's wasted as a farm hand. He ought to be a vacuum-cleaner salesman, going round from house to house persuading the ladies to part with their cash. By gum!" he repeated, "he's not getting another penny out of me, I can tell you. In fact I'm regretting what I've spent already."

It was all said pleasantly enough and meant, I have no doubt, as a joke, but there was a little more to it than that. I think he wanted me to take the hint.

The stairs to the first floor went up from the little lobby, behind the prickly curtain from which the door into my quarters opened. As in many old-fashioned houses, there was a door at the bottom of the stairs, and we now heard this close and Polly pushed her way through the curtain into the living room, where she stood, for a moment, looking from one to the other of us.

"The missus is looking fine," Eli chuckled; "look after her, John."

I wouldn't call John Merry very bright in the uptake, or anything like it, but when Eli said that he threw him a look as much as to say pity you can't practise what you preach.

Polly looked wonderful, but it was not with any titivating she might have done in her room, it was from a light she had shining out of her, and I knew that it was I, George Sudley, who had ignited it just as I now know as certainly that it was I, George Sudley, who was destined to put it out.

Without looking at me John Merry said, "Are you coming along too, Sudley?"

"No, thanks all the same. Whist drives aren't much in my line."

"Sit in here with me, Sudley, and keep me company," Eli said.

I did, but that wasn't in my line either.

. . . . .

Again at seven ack emma Polly came out to the cowshed. That, perhaps, is one of the reasons that everything went so badly wrong for us. I find the early morning a bad time to plan either one's life or one's love life. It was the only time Polly and I could be sure of being alone together.

We did not touch each other. In fact I went on milking.

"We can't go on like this," Polly said.

I agreed absolutely.

I suppose that no lover will ever admit that his own love affair is not great, of the same stuff as Othello's love, as Antony's love, as Robert Browning's love. And I, though rather less in a position than most people to believe so, was quite sure that our love was not the usual three-cornered affair. I was quite sure that our love was great and, in spite of all that has happened, I still am.

I said: "Polly, you are absolutely right. We're not going to go on kissing behind doors, in corners, just out of sight and earshot of poor Eli. What do you suggest?"

"You must go away, George. Go away and get a job. You're a good worker, you ought to have no difficulty in getting another job. Then when you've got somewhere for us to live I'll come and join you. It will make Eli terribly unhappy and I don't believe one can ever be happy at the expense of anyone else. But I'll prepare him. I'll let him see that the way things are three people are unhappy and if I go to you then only one will be unhappy." She sighed heavily. "It will never come off. It is too selfish, isn't it?"

"Polly," I said, "I'm not really the man for you. I must go; I should never have come. I have no money at all in the world other than what I have saved since I have been here."

"Surely you don't think I mind that?"

"Not only that, Polly, I'm a—I'm a bad lot."

"What do you mean?"

"Just let me assure you I'm a bad lot and leave it at that."

"Don't talk to me as though I were a child," Polly said. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a convict on licence."

There was a long pause.

"I don't believe it."

"Perfectly true. I can give you proof. I have it in the pocket of my best suit. Before I came here I was in Parkhurst Gaol. Parkhurst, you know, in the Isle of Wight. I was sentenced to five years for——" I paused. I knew what I was doing was the essence of cruelty, but, God help me, I was doing what I believed to be the right thing, the only decent thing, in fact, that I have ever done, "—for robbery with violence. I did three-and-a-half years."

Polly was breathing rapidly. "It's not you you're talking about. Not you."

"Indeed it is. That is the George Sudley you profess to have fallen in love with. Robbery with violence."

"Robbery with violence," she repeated, like an echo.

"It was damn' nearly murder," I said, "but for the grace of God——"

"But you're kind," she protested, "gentle——"

I shook my head. "Look how I lashed out at John Merry the other week. I've got one hell of a temper. Even these cows——"

"I can't believe it."

I'm glad, looking back, that I completed my grand gesture of renunciation. I know I really meant it. In fact I was in such a state of complete righteousness that I could have stopped milking and walked out then and there, off the farm, taking my brown-paper parcel under my arm, and going, as I had come, upon the spur of the moment. Then I remembered that four pounds was due to me in tomorrow's pay-packet.

"Yes, you've backed a wrong 'un this time, Polly, my dear. But you'll get over it. You've got a good man in Eli. He'll always be kind to you; he'll"—and here I couldn't help

a downward twisting of my mouth—"he'll make you a good husband, my dear. In the end kindness and goodheartedness are what count. I have neither. You can remember George Sudley as your 'demon lover', not," I reminded her, "that I have ever been your lover."

I looked at her ankles above the red clogs. I could not raise my eyes to her face. In the air above us there flew, invisible, a ragged banner across which was written, "Robbery with Violence."

She turned away. As she left the shed she stumbled slightly.

. . . . .

My determination held all day Thursday and on Friday morning I awoke full of apprehension: was I going to let myself down? Cautiously I sounded myself. It was still all right. I was going.

After the first part of the morning's work was over Eli suggested that I drive him into the town. He wanted to go to the bank to get out money.

"What did you do before I came about getting money out of the bank? You never went into the town every week, did you?"

"No. The bank have a branch in Lambing, open once a week. Polly went in on her bicycle every Friday morning. What's wrong with you, Sudley? Got out of bed the wrong side?"

"I'm not a blooming chauffeur," I said. "What would you do if I weren't here?"

He looked surprised. "I guess Polly'd have to drive me."

I said, "You're not too bad yourself. I'd say you've a good chance now of passing your driving test."

"Oh no. I'm not that good."

"You'll have to pass it some time," I pointed out; "the sooner the better. You'd better drive into the town this morning and we'll see how you get on."

So I tied the big L on the back of the Land Rover and we went off, bumping down the green and through the white gates into the lane. Eli was grumbling away about his leg

being painful and messing about with the gears, and I suppose I wasn't paying attention. I never had a bigger shock in my life than when we went sailing out of the end of the lane at something like thirty-five miles an hour and, round the bend in the road, at something like forty-five miles an hour, came the milk-lorry. Eli lost his head and control of his feet at the same time. I am sure he was pressing the accelerator violently and wondering why the car did not stop. I acted quite instinctively, tearing at the steering-wheel and pulling it round so that we darn nearly turned turtle. The lorry swerved, too, taking a glancing blow at our starboard rear and ending up with its radiator well into the hedge. The Land Rover was half buried in the hedge on the other side; if it had been a wall or a deepish ditch there wouldn't have been much left of us.

The driver of the lorry climbed down, as white as snow, and we all did a little mild cursing. Mrs. Tegg came out from her cottage which was also the shop. The Merrys, mother and son, and even the little Tiffin arrived on the scene, and several curious villagers.

Eli looked like the Wrath of God; with shaking finger he pointed at the stricken lorry-driver. "Jim Turner," he said, " 'twas your fault entirely. You've got into hot water before now; you've been up before the Bench once on a charge of dangerous driving and you got off. Well, you're not getting off with it a second time."

Our milk had been collected some time ago. The lorry had been the round of farms beyond and, the collection now complete, he had been on his way back to the town with his load of cans. His work for the day being nearly over, I was sure the driver was going too fast and probably driving carelessly, but in this case Eli Edge was certainly to blame.

Unexpectedly Mrs. Tegg of the shop bore into the affray. "Nay, Mr. Edge, that's not fair. You drove past us like a streak of lightning. I thought, 'That's much too fast for a beginner,' and I was just going to say as much to our Len when we heard the crash."

That seemed to be the general opinion, apart from the Merrys, who were careful not to take sides. It bore out the impression I had had that Eli Edge was not popular.

"If you ask me," I said—nobody had, but that didn't matter—"it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. You," I said, pointing to young Jim Turner, "want to watch out. When you've collected all your stuff and your day's work's nearly over, it doesn't mean there's nobody about on the roads. The later you are in the morning the more careful you have to be. That bend in the road just where this lane comes out is dangerous. Watch out next time."

He wasn't taking it; he became a little truculent. His fright had worn off rapidly and the fact that the majority of the onlookers sided with him had done him no good. He said: "I've got to step on it to be back at the depot by midday. It's sixty-two miles, all told, is my round. You've got to step on it to make it in the time."

I let him have the last word. What did it matter?

Presently, with help, the two vehicles were back on the road and, apart from the shocking dent in the side of the Land Rover and another big gash in the already battered mud-guard of the milk-lorry, everything looked surprisingly normal. Jim Turner drove off in a mild form of dudgeon, unrepentant, and Eli and I climbed back into the Land Rover. He didn't want to drive, but I made him, pointing out that now he had been "blooded" he would be more careful.

"I'm shaking all over," he observed.

"Shake on," I said; "if you don't drive again now you might lose what nerve you have and never drive again."

"Blast you, George Sudley," Eli said mildly; "I don't know why I take it from you."

Things being as they were, it was five o'clock on Friday evening before I got my pay-packet on my tea-tray.

I had my tea in my quarters, then I changed into my grey herring-bone suit and made up a parcel of the few possessions I had collected. It was now somewhat bigger than when I had arrived, due, in the main, to my gumboots. I could have written a note to Polly, but I did what I thought was a good deal more telling: I took out the slip of paper that I had kept in my pocket for five weeks: H.M. IS GRACIOUSLY PLEASED TO GRANT TO DEREK ANNESLEY ST. GEORGE SUDLEY

HIS ROYAL LICENCE TO BE AT LARGE. There was a little ornament of what I believe is called "Goss" on the chimney-piece. I slipped one corner of my slip of paper beneath it and left it hanging.

I gently shut the front door behind me and went off down the green—left, right, left, right, left, right—as deliberately as I had walked down the drive at Parkhurst.

Did I really think I was leaving Hill Farm? Yes, I can say now that I honestly did. The mood of splendid renunciation was still upon me and I really believed I was leaving Hill Farm—and the love of my life—forever.

Left, right, left, right. I closed the white gates and looked back. Only a miracle or some unbelievable coincidence could send me back now. I looked back because smoke might be pouring from the roof, the place might be on fire and I would have to go back. It wasn't. Nor was Polly standing on the corner of the house waving to me, beckoning to me to return.

Despairingly I turned away. I looked at the windows of Cloud Farm. Mrs. Merry was not looking out; she would not come out and stop my going as she had done before.

So I went on up the lane wondering if I were sprouting wings or if a blooming halo was appearing over my head.

. . . . .

As I turned out of the lane into the road, at the very place we had had the accident in the morning, I met the German, Eyvind. He didn't look at all pleased to see me; he quickened his pace and nodded. He was certainly going to Hill Farm. Good, I thought, he can milk the cows tonight for them, if Eli's leg is still painful. Perhaps they will persuade him to stay and work for them again. Then I won't be missed, I thought bitterly.

I went trudging along the mile or two into Lambing. If the bus into the town had gone I would get a lift on a lorry into the town—or back to London.

Whatever I intended to do, it was not to try and get another job as farm labourer in Bedfordshire. I had an idea that I was through with farming. Until I went to Parkhurst I

had never worked hard in my life; it didn't come naturally; somehow or another I had always managed to avoid hard work, except in prison and during the last five weeks at Hill Farm. It was a pity, I thought, that the first job I had ever held down in my life, the first job in which I had really worked hard, should end thus, through no fault, I told myself, of my own.

I had been walking for about a quarter of an hour when there was a sudden noise behind me which nearly startled me out of my wits. I leaped to the side of the road and a great green Lagonda sports car slid past me and drew up just in front of me. The laughing face of Madge Clay looked out. "You jumped about a foot off the ground," she shouted. "I've just been up to Hill Farm."

"What for?"

"To see you."

I said I didn't believe that. She said that honestly it was true. But anyway she'd gone to get a sack of feeding-stuff for her hens. It was strictly against the law, of course, but she gave Pa Edge about three times what the corn was worth and he "came over". "I can't afford it," she said, "but I get my money back selling my eggs to simpletons who'll pay anything for a fresh egg."

She gave the *keeshond* that was sitting beside her a pat and the animal leaped over the seat into the back of the car. She held open the door and smiled at me. "Hop in, George," she said. "I'll give you a lift."

Where to?

No need to tell her I had left Hill Farm. It would lead to unnecessary explanations. Though I didn't actually say so, I gave the impression that I was on leave for a day and a night. She could not have been more pleased. I must come and have a drink; she would fix me a "Flagpole Special" and she bet I had never tasted anything like it. So did I. With something like apathy I allowed myself to be whisked along the country road, like a bullet, the seven miles to Potter St. Mary. It was painfully clear that we would have a party, that we would both get fearfully drunk and that we would finally both leap joyfully into Miss Clay's bed.

But things didn't go quite like that.

I was duly impressed with The Flagpole, which was certainly a "little Tudor gem" with every modern convenience. I liked Madge Clay, too; she was a fine girl, big-hearted, open-bedded, with money of her own and not a single inhibition.

But I felt as lonely as a cloud and the more I drank the less cheerful I became. I would have been poor company indeed for Madge Clay but for the fact that she had worked herself into a fine state of elation, talking incessantly and roaring with laughter at her own jokes. I wondered why she had even bothered to pick me up, she was so successfully a party in her own right, as it were.

The cocktail was a good one in the White Lady class, with a big splash of Cointreau; it was a long time since I had tasted anything like it. I had three. Then we had supper, cold tongue and boiled eggs, sitting in her little kitchen which looked like an illustration of the perfect kitchenette with its pretty checked curtains and enamel fittings. We had a bottle of Rhine wine with the food and by the time we had washed up and had coffee and Benedictine we should have been in good fettle. But I became more and more morose. I did not want to go to bed with Madge Clay and I did not see how I was going to get out of it.

Time slips by in great unnoticed chunks when you have had a lot to drink. Even I realized that it sounded a bit silly when, after eleven o'clock, I politely said I must go. She was sitting very close to me on the sofa; we had been listening to some old gramophone records, and I patted her hand and got up, leaving her in no doubt at all as to my intentions. She took it all in very good part; she yawned and stretched herself luxuriously and said that of course I wasn't going to leave. Where did I propose going? She wasn't going to get the car out at that time of night to take me back to Hill Farm, she said. I would have to occupy her brother's bedroom. He was a sailor and was only home occasionally, but she kept his room in readiness because she never knew when he would arrive.

So I slept in her brother's room and slept very well. I do not know at what hour she gave up hope, but she must have

slept well too, for in the morning she was as bright-eyed and buxom as ever, bounding about the small kitchen preparing delicious coffee. The sun was streaming in and, sitting opposite to each other at the little table with the checked cloth, I am sure we looked just like a coloured American advertisement for a patent breakfast food; the perfect couple, the bright little room, etc., etc. The only thing that was wrong with the picture was me, or rather the sulky expression which I am sure I wore on my face. I felt sulky and discontented; if only I had been differently constituted I could have married Madge and we could have lived fairly happily ever after.

"What's the matter, George?" she said. "You look like a sick headache."

"Hardly surprising after your 'Flagpole Special'."

"You're in love with Mrs. Edge, aren't you?"

"No."

"Oh! Give me that, please. If you weren't in love with her, or with someone, you might be a little more, well, interested in me."

"I like you," I said, pressing her hand on the table.

"But you don't love me. You're old-fashioned, aren't you, G.?"

"I hadn't thought so."

"Oh, but you are."

There was a long pause whilst she drank her coffee and looked out of the window. I guessed she was thinking about Polly and my guess was confirmed by her next remark: "Why do men always hanker after what they can't get?"

"You mean——"

She thought very carefully before she answered. I think she was really trying not to say anything against Polly. At last she said: "Polly Edge has everything." Which is what I had thought the first time I saw Polly. "But she keeps it to herself, just out of reach."

Immediately I began to protest and she smiled, rather a rueful smile. "I thought you weren't in love with her?"

I made no admission but I said, "You don't think she'd ever leave her husband, then?"

"No, I don't. She's got everything she wants. Security.

Old Edge is as rich as Croesus; if he lives another twenty years, as he well might, she'll only be in early middle age when he dies. She's mistress of Hill Farm; it's a one-eyed show, I grant you, but it means something to her, and she's got every man she ever meets falling for her. She's evidently not keen to have children. What more could she want?"

"You're not right, you know. It isn't like that. I've lived there for some weeks, so I am in a position to know more about them than you. Polly leads a miserable life. You should see how hard she has to work. And Eli keeps her at it."

Madge merely smiled. "More coffee?"

"And who are all these men you say are in love with her?"

"Every man who ever goes up to Hill Farm comes away bewitched. All the wives in that part of Bedfordshire cross their fingers when they know hubby has a call at Hill Farm, Cloud. When she went to the Young Farmers' Union dance, with John Merry, the crowd to dance with her was like a rugger scrum, strong men got injured in the fray."

"Yes," I murmured, "John Merry is in love with her, or was."

"And Eyvind, the German boy. He's crazy about her. That's why he left."

"I was told he left to get better pay."

"Well, they wouldn't be likely to give you the real reason. He was sick with love for her, went right off his food. He wasn't getting anywhere, so he left. I often wonder what Eli Edge really thinks about it all. We've known him for many years. The whole county was buzzing with it, I can tell you, when Eli produced his new bride."

"Do you really mean," I said, "that Eyvind is in love with Polly?"

"Suicidally," she said, impressively.

And he was probably at Hill Farm now. At this moment, maybe, Polly was supplying him with a plate of congealing bacon and a tepid egg which should have been for me.

"Smoke?"

"No, thanks," I said, brooding darkly.

Presently, "How much longer leave have you got, George?"

"Not . . ." I stammered, ". . . not any more. I must be getting back."

"I'll run you back."

"No," I said, but not firmly. "No. You've been very good to me. You're a kind girl."

"Not altogether kind," she said, looking hard at the end of her cigarette. "I do a good deal for myself, on the side, but it doesn't always come off."

Curiously, the moment was almost an emotional one.

So this was how it was going to work out that I should go back to Hill Farm after my tremendous renunciation!

Writing all this out reveals clearly to me the shocking flaws in my make-up, and here is the worst of the lot. I have no moral stamina; there is only one thing I can't resist and that is temptation.

I let her reverse the great green car out of the garage and we drove back to Lambing, through the lovely spring morning. I wouldn't let her take me any further than Lambing. She stopped outside the post office. She did not drive away at once but sat for a minute or two, talking to me as I stood in the road, with my brown-paper parcel under my arm. She ought to have lived in a village long enough to know that this was unwise, but evidently she did not care what anyone thought.

And they thought plenty.

The faces of the cottages looked as bland as ever, but behind the curtains the owners of the cottages were looking out. Not for the world would they have allowed their breath to stir the curtains, but in the sculleries behind them the potatoes could boil dry, the milk boil over, the pie burn, they wouldn't move away from the window so long as there was anything to see.

Perhaps out of devilment Madge kept me there, beside the car. I wouldn't know. She told me the one about the doctor and the society woman, and the one about the policeman and the drunken man, and the one about the parson and the tart and then, and only then, she cried: "So long, G. It's been lovely!" and zipped off.

I saw Miss Thing, the postmistress, bob down and, though

I hadn't a soul in the world to write to, I went into the post office and bought three twopenny stamps simply in order to glare sternly at her.

Then I set off back along the road to Cloud.

I tried to justify myself, walking along that country road. There's no point in walking out and leaving the floor to the German, Eyvind, I told myself. He's a handsome devil, I thought, any girl might make a fool of herself over him. I must save Polly from that. I felt a sudden burst of anger against Eli, the old fool. Didn't he ever see what was going on directly under his nose? Was he really so self-satisfied that he thought he was all that Polly wanted? Was he going to accept indefinitely Polly's willingness to serve him, her youth, her energy, her beauty, without question? The damned fool.

As I approached the turning to Hill Farm the milk-lorry came towards me very fast. I leaped into the ditch, yelling furiously, but it swept past as purposefully as a guided missile, and as deadly. Evidently the mishap yesterday morning had increased Jim Turner's confidence in a perverted way. I shook my fist after him.

Eli was standing by the pond at the top of the path exactly as though he were waiting for me.

"Well, well, well! Been on the tiles? Hee-hee!"

"I'm sorry," I said, sullenly.

"Never mind, me boy, never mind. We all must have our little binges. Hee-hee!"

I could have killed him, standing there hinnying. Little binges!

"Have the cows been done?"

"Bless you, yes. Eyvind turned up last night; he milked for us, and seeing as you didn't come back he spent the night in your bed and milked for me this morning."

"What about his job?"

"Friday night, bless you. They don't work on Sat'day mornings in factories. Hadn't you heard? Next time you go you might let us know, Sudley. It's a bit off, walking out like that. Polly said you'd gone for good. That shows you how much faith she's got in you. But I knew you hadn't. I knew you'd only gone off on the binge."

I had to turn away or I should have knocked him backwards into the slime of the pond.

. . . . .

The Land Rover was out.

Polly, if you please, had taken it out. She had gone into the town, shopping.

It was quite all right, the L was on the back, and, of course, Eyvind was with her, so nothing would happen. Quite all right!

It was then, I think, I began to get angry.

CHAPTER VII

I FLUNG into my quarters and looked round. Everything was quite neat and tidy and apparently as I had left it. Even the little slip of paper I had left under the ornament was still there, blowing gently to and fro in the breeze from the open window. I wondered if Polly had seen it; if she had brought in the lamp last night as usual she could hardly have failed to. I had left it by way of a gesture, the writing of *finis* to our affair, with a flourish. H.M. IS GRACIOUSLY PLEASED TO GRANT TO DEREK ANNESLEY ST. GEORGE SUDLEY HIS ROYAL LICENCE TO BE AT LARGE. I applied my lighter to the corner and held the burning paper in my fingers until there was nothing left of it, the few black fragments fell on to the hearth, ashes to ashes, like all my good resolutions.

The crone who did the rough work for Polly was sloshing about the scullery with a very wet mop. Everything was exactly as it had been the first time I came to Hill Farm. Eli and the cats were lying on the mud-coloured sofa and, talking of mud, I told him of the job I had in mind. The pond had silted up. It hadn't been cleared of weeds and muck for years. Once it was cleared, with a foot or so of clean water in it from the spring, it would be useful. The cows could drink out of it; it would be a boon in hot weather, and we could

have some ducks. In fact it would improve the appearance of the farm considerably. How about it?

Eli was cautious. He wasn't going to spend any more money if he could help it. Would it mean hiring a small grubber?

No, I told him, I would do it myself.

He was impressed.

So I hove to and set to work on the pond with pick and shovel and a wheelbarrow for the muck. Taking great shovelsful of slime and flinging it into a barrow was just what I felt inclined to do. After I had been at it for two hours I felt a great deal better and looked forward to sharpening my wits at Eyvind's expense.

At last I saw the Land Rover at the gate. I saw the German jump down and hold the gate open and I saw Polly drive cautiously in and wait for Eyvind to close the gate and jump back beside her. It bumped and wobbled up the green and came to a stop beside me. I pretended to ignore them, throwing spadefuls of stuff about with great abandon. Polly drove on up into the farmyard and presently Eyvind sauntered down for a word with me, hands in pockets, looking as though he belonged to the place.

"Look here," I said, "if you want your job back you can have it. But if you don't want it, how about keeping away and letting me get on with it?"

He said something which I had to ask him to repeat: it was to the effect that it was a good thing he had come last night, Mr. Edge couldn't have managed the milking alone, or this morning either. He added something about Polly thinking I had gone away for good.

"Well, I didn't. I've come back for good, though."

He gave me a long sullen stare. One of the many mistakes I made was that of under-estimating Eyvind's brain power. No one could be quite as stupid as he looked. "You've come back for good?" he repeated wonderingly. "For whose good?"

I leaned on my spade. "After all these years, how can you be so bad at English? I mean for keeps, for ever."

"For ever! You come back for ever!"

I nodded.

He continued to stare at me, puffy-faced and uncomprehending.

"I don't sink so."

"Oh, you don't!" I viciously jabbed my shovel into the side of the pond and brought it out dripping, with the muck it could not contain slopping over the side. "Get out or I'll chuck this at you."

"I do not go because you tell me to," he said, with the accent upon the you. "Why should I? I have a day off. I stay for dinner to which Mrs. Edge kindly ask me, and afterwards I go for a walk with Mrs. Edge in the woods."

Whilst Eli snores on the sofa, I thought. Idyllic. How wonderful to have such perfect trust in your wife. Yet I was being unfair to Eli, for if adultery was in my mind I knew as well as he must know that Polly and Eyvind would not commit adultery in the woods, nor anything like it. Now if it were Polly and I, I thought stoutly, it might be a different matter. But I felt with a certain sickly doubt that it might not.

"Go and have a nice walk in the woods," I said, with a nasty edge to my voice; "get out of my sight before I chuck half this pond over you."

I went on with my work. In books, I thought, in novels anyway, girls are so accessible. Sooner or later they give themselves. Boy meets girl and usually upon the same page they sleep together; if they don't you know pretty well it won't be delayed for long, and if, by sheer perversity it is delayed, then you know that it will be upon the last page. If the story of Polly and me were at all normal we should already have slept together; after I had kissed her there would be a row of dots, the merciful author's indication that all was won. Perhaps, I thought, the thing will be delayed so long that when we do finally hustle into bed together it will be a shocking anticlimax. Eli, I thought, might even ask us how we enjoyed it. Oh yes, I could wax whimsical enough when Polly wasn't there to quicken my pulse.

I was, in fact, having quite a nice little time wallowing in muck when I suddenly noticed the red clogs on the bank just above me.

She didn't say "So you're back" or "I thought you'd gone for good," or anything of the sort. She simply said, "Your dinner's ready," and turned away.

What if Eli died? I wondered. Suppose she were left a widow. Would she marry me knowing what she did, or would her innate respectability prevent her from doing so? Perhaps, now that she knew about me, she wouldn't be prepared to love me any more. "You are me," she had said in a simple, unemotional way. Would she have said it if she had known? Oddly enough I thought about my friend the padre. What would he say to all this? I could almost hear him: "Why couldn't you go and get yourself a nice unattached girl, Sudley? Don't tell me you couldn't help this. One can always help falling in love."

Yes, I suppose one can. But I hadn't wanted to. As a child I had been fairly greedy. I would gobble up any luxury there might be, knowing quite well that I would be sick or have a pain after it, or both. Knowing it and not caring. Yes, I could have helped falling in love with Polly, but I didn't want to.

Well, supposing Eli died?

If she did marry me, supposing Eli died, what a good thing Polly and I could make out of Hill Farm! I would build up the outbuildings that had fallen down. I would clear the barn of the cows and keep it solely for storing corn. Along the west side, here, between the pond and the farmyard, on the bank where Polly had been standing, I would build a fine cow-house with a door at each end so that the cows could come in right off the fields and go out the same way, and the milk could be brought out at the end nearest the farm. The cooler could be in an outhouse beside the cow-house and the cans could be loaded straight on to the truck. Or better still the pathway down the green would be repaired and gravel laid so that the milk-lorry could come right up to the yard and thus save the labour of lugging the cans down to the gate. I would have a garage and a cart shed where I could keep the new tractor I would buy, and behind the new sheds I would build the pigstyes. I'd have an electric generator, too, that would work the milking machine. I would go to the Dairy Exhibition

in London in the autumn and walk round, choosing my equipment carefully. All the latest of everything I would have. I would run the farm for Polly in such a way that it would be the best farm in Bedfordshire, the model farm.

I threw a great spadeful of muck into the barrow. I'd hire a Massey-Harris grubber, and clear out this pond in no time. I'd clear away that absurd bath standing opposite the house. I'd get the water piped away from the pond properly, with taps in suitable places. I was just about to begin on the improvement inside the house when I remembered an important point.

Eli was not dead, nor anything like it.

I might have to wait around for twenty years or so before he died.

There were Edges buried in the old graveyard at Upper Cloud, rows of them. "Died 1781, aged 90", "aged 87", "in his 85th year", "in ye eighty-seventh yeare of her lyfe", and so on. They lived, the Edges. They weren't the dying sort. They lived to a ripe old age. There was nothing to kill them off in the peace of Hill Farm; they went on ticking over as Eli would go on ticking over. The farm would gradually fall to pieces around him, but he would stay there until he was so old there would be simply a breath between his being alive and being dead. A breath—a detail.

A mere detail.

. . . . .

Eli, of course, might meet with an accident. He might kill himself driving the Land Rover; he might be gored by a bull; only the other day a Bedfordshire farmer was killed by his own bull, crushed against the wall of the shed. He might trip over his own gun. He might fall backwards through the opening out of the corn loft, or down the well. He might fall down the five steep stone steps which lead from the scullery into the old dairy with the stone-flagged floor. The more I thought about it, in fact, the more precarious did Eli's hold on life appear to be. The fact that he had lived over sixty years at Hill Farm without anything of the kind happening was neither here nor there.

CHAPTER VIII

In the early afternoon I was sitting by my window trying to read the newspaper, but really keeping a close watch for Eyvind and Polly to pass on their way out for their walk in the woods. Who should appear, however, but the little Tiffin, all dressed up in quite a tricky outfit. She tapped on my open front door, but seemed thunderstruck when I invited her in. It was several minutes before she divulged, a little pathetically, that she had called on the chance of finding me at a loose end and would I go to the pictures in the town with her? "I don't feel like going on my own, it's nice to have company," she volunteered. Certainly, I agreed, it was nice to have company, but what about John Merry? Couldn't he take her?

"Oh, him!" she dismissed him vaguely.

I got myself ready and we set out and as I turned to shut the gate behind us I saw Eyvind and Polly come round the side of the house. What a lot of silly fooling about it was! Last night Madge Clay and today Tiffin the land girl. All this playing about, like a couple of school kids trying to make each other jealous, and all that really mattered was Polly and me.

The afternoon and evening passed pleasantly enough. We went to the pictures and sat stiffly side by side like an uncle and niece. Then we had a fish and chip supper with lots of strong tea and cream puffs after. There was a time when I would have dismissed those cream puffs as being unfit for human consumption, but I enjoyed them as much as my companion.

Jogging back on the bus I hoped that something might have happened at the farm during my absence. I remember thinking that perhaps Eli would have had a stroke or a heart attack, in which case all our troubles would be over.

It was dark when we got off the bus at Lambing, and as we walked the long road to Cloud the little Tiffin became strangely quiet. She hooked herself on to my arm and we walked in silence.

I saw the lights of a car parked by the white gates as soon as we turned into the lane, but it was only when I got up to it I saw what car it was.

"Good lord!" I exclaimed with some excitement. "The doctor!"

The Tiffin did not relax her hold on my arm, indeed she seemed to hang a little harder. When we reached the gate of Cloud Farm she thanked me prettily. Still she seemed reluctant to let go of my arm. She obviously wanted to be kissed, but I unhooked her brusquely; I was in a hurry to know what had been happening at Hill Farm.

Halfway up the green I met the doctor. It was too dark for him to recognize me at first, but when I spoke he said, "Oh, it's you." He had seen me working about the place.

Was anything wrong? I asked. He didn't usually call late on a Saturday night.

"As it happens," he said, "it is nothing very much. But it might have been a lot worse. You'd better hurry, you've got it coming to you."

I had indeed got it coming to me. Heaven protect me from the anger of a patient man!

Eli Edge was lying on the mud-coloured sofa shooting off his face, as they say in America; that means he was in one hell of a rage. And the object of his fury was me—George Sudley. What did I mean by walking off again without so much as a by your leave? Didn't I realize that a farm doesn't run itself? Surely after my absence last night and this morning I could have stayed around today, and if I couldn't, then I could at least have had the decency to tell them I was going to be out again for the milking.

"But Eyvind was here," I said.

"Eyvind nothing!" Eli yelled. "He only came for a friendly visit. Polly left him at the bus stop and came back to get tea."

"How was I to know that?"

"Look here——" Eli spluttered.

"Well, what's happened, anyway?"

This is what had happened. When I wasn't there to milk the cows there was nothing for it but Eli had to milk them himself. Owing to that painful leg of his he fell, slipped on

the floor of the shed, just as he had been carrying two full pails out to the cooler. Milk had poured all over the place in a great flood and Eli had lain helpless in the lake of milk, screaming for aid. Milk, of all things; he loathed the stuff!

There was nothing wrong with him, of course, he hadn't even got a broken leg. But he was bruised all over and badly shaken. Polly had rushed for John Merry, who, fortunately, had been able to come up and give a hand with getting Eli, loudly complaining, back to his sofa. He had also gone off to telephone for the doctor and had returned to milk the remaining cows. Eli did not know what they would have done without him.

"What are you grinning at, Sudley?" he shouted furiously.

I instantly shut off my grin, if, indeed, it had been a grin. I suppose I had been thinking feeble things about crying over spilt milk, and so forth.

"There's something . . ." Eli spluttered, "wrong about you, Sudley." I guessed he had been struggling for the word "fundamentally". I had heard before that there was something fundamentally wrong about me; it came as no surprise.

"You may be a good enough worker; when you like there's nobody better. And you're a useful sort of chap in lots of ways, but you're—you're unreliable. That's it! Unreliable!" Eli was quite soothed by his own mastery of language. He even repeated it, "Unreliable!" He went on: "You must pull yourself together or I'll have to get shut of you, and that's a fact. When I first clapped an eye on you I thought me, 'Here's one of those gentlemen farmers you hear about. He'll be no good.' And bless me if I wasn't right, though it looked at first as though I was wrong. We'd do better with a brainless clod than we've done with you these last twenty-four hours, believe me," and so on and so forth.

I said I was sorry. I didn't stint it. I apologized pretty thoroughly. I had chosen to return to Hill Farm against all reason, obeying only my instinct. The Lord only knew for what red hell I was heading, but having returned I must make the best of it and get the atmosphere back to as nearly normal as possible. I said that I was very sorry indeed and that I would see it did not happen again.

I don't know whether he was making much of his injuries in order to impress me or not, but when the time came I had to help him up the stairs on his way to bed. Polly followed us, carrying a tumbler of water and two pink sleeping tablets which the doctor had left for Eli.

On the great oak coffer on the landing stood a lighted candle in its brass holder and beside it a stuffed owl served up on pieces of dried fern and leaves glared at us from inside a glass dome. All the rest of the huge landing was in darkness; it felt chilly and dank and Eli's feet dragged on the polished linoleum, like the feet of an elderly man in one of the gloomiest of Russian plays. As he shuffled off to the bedroom I turned and looked at Polly holding the tumbler of water and carrying the tablets on a spoon. She looked perfect; her small face illuminated by the candle might have been delicately carved from ivory; her hair was drawn back to show her tiny ears, and the hair, which was of that fatal colour which drives men mad (so they say), fell in a kind of cascade down to her shoulders from the point where it was secured by some sort of fastener on the top of her head. Her great dark eyes as she passed me and followed Eli to their bedroom held all of despair.

Before going downstairs I stood for a moment, with my hand on the knob of the stair rail. As Polly shut the door of their room she did not look at me, but in the flickering candlelight the little owl blinked malevolently.

. . . . .

A tap on my bedroom door awoke me and, lighting my candle, I saw by my tin alarm clock that it was a quarter to midnight.

Polly stood at the door. "Come into the parlour. Eli is asleep. I must talk to you."

"Come in and talk to me here," I said, but Polly shook her head.

All right, I thought, if it is like that I shall get dressed. I put on a few clothes and went into the Edges' living-room. Polly was fully dressed, she was standing by the chimney-piece, and as I came in she stirred a log of the dying fire with her foot.

"Why did you come back, George?" she said.

"You must know why, Polly."

"No good can come of it."

"When two people love each other like you and I, no good can come of—of not getting on with it."

"You're wrong," Polly declared. "I don't think you can ever be completely happy if you're making a third person unhappy."

"I could argue about that," I said.

"Well, don't argue. I want you to go away again, and this time do it properly. After what happened tonight you can do it easily. Get up early and go after you have milked the cows. Simply leave a note to tell Eli that this isn't the job for you. . . ."

But I put my arms round her and kissed the words off her lips. The heavens opened and through the great rent across the black sky I saw unspeakable glories.

When, breathless, we parted, Polly sank down on to the mud-coloured sofa and wept.

I let her cry. I sat down on the sofa beside her and let her cry, not touching her again.

For about five minutes she cried, and when her tears were abating her face was red and swollen and patchy, and then I loved her very dearly; I was glad that she was not so superhumanly beautiful that she did not mess up her face when she cried, like other women.

"It's no good," she said. "I love you, George. I've tried very hard not to. I don't care who you are or what you have done. I love you."

I opened my mouth to speak, but she stopped me.

"Don't tell me, I don't want to know about what you did. It makes me feel a really bad woman."

"A gangster's moll," I said unhelpfully.

Polly said: "What about your family? What do your Mum and Dad think of it?"

"Fortunately," I said dryly, "I haven't a Mum or Dad, or perhaps if I had it wouldn't have happened. They were both killed in an accident when I was a few months old and I was pulled, pushed and even kicked up by a great-aunt who thought me an infernal nuisance, which, no doubt, I was. I have no

brothers or sisters, and such other aunts, uncles and cousins as I may have would probably decline to have any knowledge of me at all." I paused. "I believe my parents were very proud of me. I was christened at a little country church and there were a host of distinguished godparents. Derek Annesley St. George Sudley. Yes, I was launched on the world with everything in my favour. Don't think I'm complaining. I have only myself to blame for the mess I have made of my life." I paused again. "But have I made a mess of my life? I've found you, Polly. A great many highly successful men live out their lives without ever finding their real mate. So you see, Polly, I am really one of the lucky ones."

"Don't talk like that—you'll make me cry again."

"And now," I said—it was a trifle half-hearted—"we must make our plans for running away."

But I knew that line was no good; now that she knew me to be a convict on licence there was less likelihood than ever of her going away with me. There was nothing of the gipsy in Polly, and in spite of all appearances to the contrary she was essentially monogamous. But still I persisted. I said she was overestimating Eli's reactions. After all, she was the second Mrs. Edge, she mustn't forget that. She had lived for less than two years with Eli. He would get over her going as quickly as he had accustomed himself to the idea of having her as a wife. If she had lived with him for a great many years, I pointed out, things would be different. She could not walk out on him under those circumstances, I argued reasonably.

"And another thing," I went on, "remember that even if you are the second Mrs. Edge, you will be the first Mrs. Sudley."

"Is that true, George?" She turned swollen eyes to me.

"I swear it," I said solemnly, "on my word of honour." At once I thought what a poor thing was my word of honour; but Polly, bless her, had no such thought.

"It is no good," Polly said, after a long pause. "You don't know how I feel about Eli. I do love him, in a way. I'm fond of him. It would be such a mean thing to leave him. And it would kill Mum and Dad. I would never be able to face them again."

"But it was you who suggested it in the first place, Polly. In the cowshed on Wednesday morning, you said I must go away and find a job and you would join me."

"I know I did. I'd been lying awake all night thinking about you and me, and you know how you get."

I groaned. There is a sort of hoodoo on me. Whenever I make an attempt, however feeble, to do the right thing something crops up which makes it impossible or, anyway, so difficult as not to be worth trying. I said: "If only I had taken you at your word then, my Polly! You said, 'It won't work, it would be too selfish,' or something like it, remember? Well, if only I hadn't tried, just then, to do the right thing! If I hadn't told you I was an ex-convict, if I hadn't said 'robbery with violence' you would never have known. And we would have run away together and lived happily ever after. Now we never can, for all the time you would remember 'robbery with violence'."

"It isn't that I would remember. It is Eli's unhappiness."

"Nonsense! You made light of it on Wednesday morning. You said you would prepare him. You said you would point out to him that if you stayed with him three people would be unhappy and if you went to me then only one person would be unhappy."

"It isn't fair to throw that back at me. I've told you—I had been lying awake all night thinking it over. I suppose I was in a bit of a state."

"You know—we're almost quarrelling," I said, and she put her head on my shoulder and I played with her useless little hand.

After a very long silence I said, "Is Eli really dead asleep?"

"Yes."

Then I knew there was only one thing to be done.

I said: "Polly, we're making an awful lot of fuss about something which has happened to a great many people, something which has been happening since the creation of Adam, Eve and A. N. Other. What does it all boil down to? You and I become lovers. Perfectly simple. If we are discreet about it, Eli need never know. He would be perfectly happy and so would we. I don't mean that we can go on kissing and cuddling

behind doors and all that. I mean . . .” Polly was looking at me so directly, so candidly—she looked, in fact, so clean that I hesitated and at length ended hurriedly, “I mean—you can come to my room from time to time and we could be—as man and wife.”

I was right: she was shocked, but apparently not for the reasons I thought.

“But I love you more than that,” she said. “I don’t only want to be in bed with you.”

I started again. “We can see each other off and on all day, every day——”

“Besides,” she said, “you don’t *think*. When you weren’t making love to me it would be Eli’s turn!” There was real anguish in her face. “Oh, it’s horrible, it doesn’t bear thinking about!”

. . . . .

There we were, Polly and I, sitting on Eli’s mud-coloured moquette sofa, side by side, well after midnight, with Eli deeply asleep in the room above us.

Polly loved me. And I, God only knows what I am, but I know that I had lived in monk-like chastity for years and that I wanted Polly, but I did not want her more than that I wanted our love to be something a bit above the ordinary. I did not want it consummated upon Eli Edge’s mud-coloured moquette. So I went on playing with her little rough hand with its pink palm.

If only I could roll back time to that night when we were as innocent as babes unborn!

. . . . .

Ma Merry was evidently keeping a keen eye on us at Hill Farm. When Polly went into the village on her bicycle she put on one of her hats and came up to see me. I was in the scullery scalding parts of the cooler when she came tripping across the farmyard. She wore a tweed suit which did not fit anywhere, brogues of the old-fashioned design with large tongues flapping over the instep, but her hat was the very last word, the latest Merry spring creation. It was bottle-green felt,

Cromwellian in shape and worn dead straight upon her brow; the crown was dented to form a small bowl into which were tastefully crammed several bunches of pale green and yellow cowslips. Had I been much shorter I would not have been able to see the flowers, but to a tall man looking down the effect must have been very verdant, a major spring event.

She badly needed the uplift given her by her hat. I could see at once she was not feeling as cheerful as she looked. "How is Eli?"

"Stiff, it hurts him to move. He's staying in bed all day."

"I've made him some jam tarts," she said, putting down her basket.

"Queen of Hearts!" I murmured inanely.

"Oh, George, you are naughty! I believe you'd flirt with anyone!" She almost, but not quite, pushed me playfully.

"Tell me," I said, "has our deep-laid scheme for diverting John's affections come to anything?"

"No, not so far. You've done your bit, I must say. Isn't it a shame, the land girl is ever such a dear. You like her, don't you?"

"The Tiffin? Oh, she's all right. You mean John is still——?"

She nodded. "Polly isn't the sort of girl you can forget about easily, is she?" she asked naïvely, then she added a little irritably: "When you've got the sort of looks Polly has, you ought not to go about being nice to everything in trousers. Men are so conceited, they think that when a girl like Polly smiles nicely at them she's crazy about them."

"Does John think that?"

"I never talk to John about Polly, mind. But I wouldn't put it past him. You see, they were a lot together before you came."

"And since?"

"Well, naturally they haven't been together much lately. There's so much happened since you came—the Land Rover and the new cooker and what not. But you should have seen him yesterday when you were out and Eli had his accident. Polly came flying down the green, and John saw her from the window. He dashed out to meet her like it was the archangel Gabriel himself. I heard Polly say, 'Thank goodness you're there, John,' and what do you think he said?"

"No idea."

"He said, 'I'm always there when you want me!' Just like that!" Mrs. Merry nodded vigorously, confirming her own words. "Would you believe it? 'I'm always there when you want me!' There's not much hope for Mary Tiffin, I'm thinking."

"John is old enough to be thinking about settling down," I said irritably. "It isn't as though he were eighteen. It is all wrong for him to be hanging about a married woman older than himself."

"He hero-worships her."

I sneered. "You ought to write your problem to 'Aunt Sadie' in *Ladies' Very Own*. 'My son aged twenty-two has fallen for a beautiful woman, but she is married. What should I do? I enclose stamped addressed envelope for reply.' And she will answer, 'Have a heart-to-heart talk with your son, ask him to go away for a time.' Or alternatively, 'Sprinkle pepper on the lady so that when your son comes near her he will have a fit of sneezing!' "

She was quite incapable of taking offence. "Oh, George! You are naughty! Besides—how could John go away? His work is here. What would happen to the farm if he went? Mr. Merry wouldn't do anything, he can't milk a cow and he wouldn't collect an egg."

"No," I said solemnly, "Mr. Merry's work is essentially creative."

She sighed heavily. "John doesn't seem to see beyond the end of his nose."

I could have made witty remarks about that distance, but I didn't. She was good-natured. I realize now that what she meant was that John did not observe that Polly preferred me to him. It did not occur to me for a moment that anyone would suspect anything between Polly and myself.

"Dear me," she went on, "I don't know what Bessie Edge would have thought about all this. I often think of the poor dear turning in her grave. She was a fine woman, was poor Bessie. It was a pity she couldn't have children."

"I shouldn't think Eli would mind much about that, she made him very comfortable."

"Oh, dear me," Mrs. Merry said, "you don't know Eli if you've got that idea! It broke Eli's heart that they never had children. He's passionately fond of children, is Eli. Children and animals. And he's worried about Hill Farm. He'd like another Edge to take it over when he goes. But maybe he'll be all right now."

"What?"

Ma Merry had now turned her attention to her basket. She took a clean plate from the rack beside the sink and arranged her jam tarts on it.

"What did you say?" I repeated.

"I say maybe he'll be all right now. I mean it won't be long now before Polly gives him a son, maybe."

"Good God!" I exclaimed aghast.

"Oh yes, he intends to have children. He said to Mr. Merry just about the time he got married to Polly, he said he'd 'chosen a young 'un to make sure of a son and heir this time'! Those very words."

"You couldn't surprise me more," I said coldly, and carried out my clanking pieces of the aluminium cooler. I felt I needed the cool breeze, I felt physically sick.

Thinking it over now, I still find Ma Merry's action in telling me this puzzling. If she knew all about Polly and myself being in love, I wonder what motive she had in telling me what she had just told me. I am still fond of Ma Merry, I still think her one of the nicest women I have ever known: it may be that she had no motive at all in telling me what she did, it may be that she was simply gossiping thoughtlessly. She probably wasn't thinking about me at all but about her son John, for if Polly were to become pregnant John might become uninterested. She grasped at any and every straw. John's welfare was the only thing, I believe, that ever really mattered to her.

Anyway, whatever her motive in saying what she did, the effect was prodigious.

. . . . .

Now that it is all over and I can be dispassionate about the whole thing, I wonder greatly why it was that Ma Merry's gossip upset me so completely. It seemed that hitherto I found

the idea of Polly sharing Eli's bed at least bearable, but the moment I heard that Eli entertained the idea of having a child by her the situation became completely intolerable. No doubt a psychologist would be able to understand this, but it beats me.

I knew where Eli kept his gun. It was in the long cupboard beside the parlour fire. He did not trouble to put the gun away in its case after use, but propped it up against the wall of the cupboard, it was warm in there and unlikely to rust. Now, however, that April had run out into May the gun would not be used much; I had heard Eli muttering that he would clean it and put it away in its case. The cartridges were kept in a canvas bag, hanging from a hook in the same cupboard.

No sooner had Ma Merry departed than I went to the cupboard, determined that I would load the gun, go straight upstairs, and shoot Eli point blank. I had got as far as taking some cartridges out of the bag and was turning them over in my hand when I heard a step outside the window and the German, Eyvind, stood in the parlour door, his great shadow blotting out the sun which had been streaming in on to the red tiles. He stood just inside the threshold, with his head bent slightly to avoid the beam, his great red hands hanging limply by his side.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I shouted. "Haven't you got a job of work to do?"

He mumbled something which I understood to be that he had a job of work to do but that he felt he was needed here more than there.

"Well, you're not needed," I replied, still shouting.

He did not move but stood staring lugubriously at the gun which lay across my knees. "That is a Cherman gun."

"I know it is."

"A fine rifle. I hafe use it myself. Mr. Edge is a fine hand with that gun."

"Indeed?" I said politely.

"He and I hafe shot many creatures for the pot. Rabbits, hares, pigeons, and it is fine sport shooting the jays——"

"Look," I said patiently, "I haven't time to hear your English prep. Get out!"

His eyelids flickered slightly at the last words but still he did not move. "What do you hope to shoot today?" he said.

So he wore me down. By the time our *conversazione* was at last over I hadn't the will to do anything but put the rifle back into the cupboard unloaded and the cartridges back into the canvas bag. What was the point, anyway? If I were to shoot Eli it would not bring Polly and myself together, for assuredly I should hang.

The point, of course, was that a dead Eli could not beget a child by Polly.

"You do not go shooting?" Eyvind remarked.

I looked at him, still standing inside the door. I didn't want a repetition of my sordid scuffle with John Merry, so I stalked past him and out of the room through the door into the scullery.

. . . . .

I saw two pink pills lying in a spoon on the scullery table.

"Are those for Eli again?"

"Yes," Polly said, "the doctor said he was to have them for a few nights till his nerves are settled."

"Polly," I said, without touching her, "will you come to my room tonight?"

"No," she said, instantly but very softly. "No, George, don't let it be like that."

"How will it be, then, how will it be, Polly?"

But she slipped by me and away.

It was past midnight when the tap came on my door. I was not asleep nor anything like it. I was wide awake, staring up into the darkness. I jumped up and opened the door. It was too dark for me to see her.

In a still small voice she said, "Here I am."

CHAPTER IX

IN THIS account I am taking great pains to be strictly honest, to record everything exactly as it happened. I have read through what I have written and, though it reads rather like a novel, I am certain that I have so far kept to the exact sequence of

events. I am not trying to present myself as an innocent man, as a murderer, or as something halfway between the two, but I hope that by the time I reach the end of my narrative the truth will be clear.

I got myself pretty well packed with Bible lore those years in Parkhurst, and somewhere or other, I seem to remember, St. James said something like, "Your desires go unfulfilled, so you fall to murdering." Something like that. Before it is all over I would have liked to have a talk to the padre chap at Parkhurst and ask him what he makes of it all.

Now that my so-called "desires" with regard to Polly were fulfilled that ought to have been that. We should have settled down comfortably into a happy triangle, a "design for living" practised satisfactorily by a great many people who make no song and dance about it.

Unfortunately, in our case that was by no means that; we did not settle down comfortably. I would like to be convinced that it was because the experience of completely loving Polly was unique; I would like to be sure that nothing quite like it had ever happened to any man before or since, but I am not quite so sure. What I am sure about is that the fault lies with me and in the shocking flaws in my make-up to which I have already referred.

Within a day or so Eli had recovered from his fall. He padded about the house and about the farm in a mood of dejection from which Polly did her best to rouse him. The dog Argo trailed about after him, tail hanging, eyes sad. I now noticed that all the animals loved Eli. Even the semi-wild cats followed him or sat around on the hearth in the living-room staring at him with their speculative eyes. When he came into the cowshed the cow I was milking invariably turned its head to look at him mournfully, a fact which I had not noticed before. He was like a great thundercloud threatening a delightful *déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

But Polly—to look at Polly took away my breath.

She called me into the parlour. Eli was there. "We've got to do something to cheer him up," she said, as though talking about a sick child, "to take him out of himself.

"We" (yes, she said *we*, meaning herself and Eli, *we*!)

"we were wondering if you'd think me capable of driving us both over to see Mum and Dad."

"How far is it?"

"The other side of Bedford. Do you think it would be all right?"

When Eli was there she did not speak my name. She even avoided looking at me.

"Well, you're neither of you very hot drivers yet. I wouldn't like to say. Neither of you has been out on your own yet."

"Which of us drives best, would you say?"

"Why you, I think."

Eli agreed that Polly was the better driver, adding that he only wanted practice.

"When were you thinking of going?"

"Saturday. We thought we'd spend the night, leaving you in charge here."

I said: "Mr. Edge, I would suggest your going out on your own for a bit every day from now until Saturday. It'll give you confidence." And perhaps he would kill himself. If he went out early in the morning he might have a head-on collision with the milk-lorry. "You go," I urged.

Eli bucked up somewhat. "That's not a bad idea," he said.

"What about your sciatica?" Polly said. "You don't want to drive if your leg is troubling you."

Eli waved that aside. "Don't let's bother about that," he said, very unlike himself. "Go and back out the Rover, Sudley. I'll get me boots on."

I backed out the Land Rover and left it at the top of the slope, just past the door of the Edges' living-room. I looked at the petrol gauge and saw that petrol was needed. I went into the barn to get one of the two cans we kept there in case of need. I carried it out to the Rover and unscrewed the cap. The top of the petrol tank didn't turn easily. I looked for somewhere to put the opened can down. For convenience I put it down on the floor beside the driving-seat. I couldn't for the life of me get the screw top of the petrol tank turned, so I went into the scullery to look for a spanner in a drawer where I knew they kept tools. I can only give Polly's version of what happened outside. I was in the scullery rattling about in the

drawer until I heard Polly scream. I heard her shout, "The hand brake, the hand brake, Eli!" That was all I heard.

I stood still with the drawer open and the spanner in my hand. This is it! I thought. God has done it for me.

There was a terrible silence in the scullery.

. . . . .

At last I brought myself to walk out into the farmyard. The Rover had gone, Eli had gone, Polly had gone. But when I turned the corner of the house and looked down the green I saw all three.

Eli was standing a few yards up the green, Polly's arms were round him, and the Land Rover was a fine bonfire.

. . . . .

Polly was comforting Eli like a mother her child who has fallen down. "Are you sure you're not hurt, dear?"

Ma Merry came tearing out of Cloud Farm with a cone-shaped fire-extinguisher which I took from her and used upon the blazing Land Rover with appreciable effect. Presently exactly the same small group was clustered around us as had appeared after Eli's mishap with the milk-lorry. There were a great many remarks about the inadvisability of learning to drive in one's dotage. One old gaffer tottered up to the Edges. "Well, Eli," he croaked, "hasta gone cranky? Tha's got off twice, tha won't get off a third time, mark me."

Ma Merry clicked her tongue reproachfully at these uncomfortable words. "Come on inside," she said, "and you too, George; a little cherry brandy wouldn't go amiss."

The Land Rover had missed the gate but had crashed against the stone wall of the back of Cloud Farm cowshed which formed part of Hill Farm boundary. It was obvious that the thing was hopelessly wrecked.

"Me knees are knocking together," Eli informed us. So we all went into the Merrys' kitchen for a pick-me-up. We left Mrs. Tegg from the shop and the old gaffer brooding darkly over the tangled mess.

"Well, Eli," Ma Merry said as she handed him a small glass of the thick red liquid, "you've had a marvellous escape, you should thank God upon your bended knees."

"That I shall," Eli said devoutly, emptying his glass in one prodigious suck, "that I shall."

"However did it happen?" John Merry asked.

"Search me," Eli said, turning his bleary eye full on myself, "unless Sudley knows. What have you been doing with the car, Sudley?"

Polly looked directly at me, and for the first time in public she used my name.

"Yes, George, what did you do?"

There was a sudden silence, everyone looked at me.

"Do?" I repeated stupidly. Then after a moment I collected myself and recounted my actions from the moment I went to take the car out. And when I had finished I added corroborative detail by bringing out of my pocket the spanner I had been holding in my hand. "Here's the spanner I was looking for to turn the top of the petrol tank. It's stuck once or twice before, I've used this spanner to loosen it. What on earth did *you* do?" I asked Eli.

"Well, man, you left the car there all ready for me and I went out and got in it."

"Why didn't you wait for me to give the O.K.?"

"You left it there ready and in I got," Eli grumbled. "I started up the engine and took off the brake, and blow me if I know what happened after that. All I know is we started afore I was ready and I did manage to get steered round the corner and off we went down the green, hell for leather. If the door had been shut I reckon I wouldn't be here to tell the tale. I rolled out and Polly came and picked me up."

"I see now what happened," Polly declared; "it was your own fault, Eli, you were in too much of a hurry to get started. It's no wonder they say a learner mustn't go out without an experienced driver with him. George didn't tell you the car was ready. He left the petrol-can on the floor with the top off and you didn't even see it. You started up, you took off the brake but you didn't put in the gear, so when the car rolled off you were in neutral. After you got round the corner and

you began to go really fast you lost your head again, like you did on the corner the other day. You didn't know which was the brake and which the clutch. Oh, Eli!"

"I pushed the foot brake," Eli said; "I'm not as big a fule as all that. I do know which is the foot brake."

"Mr. Edge," I said, "let me look at the soles of your boots. Yes, I thought so. Those great hobnails aren't for driving in. That's how the accident happened the other day with the milk-lorry. They're much too thick for driving. You've no idea which pedal you're pressing in great cast-iron things like that."

Eli looked thoughtfully at the sole of his boot. "Do you reckon that was how it happened?" he said mildly.

If Eli had not been smoking his pipe, I reckoned, the accident might have been a great deal worse for him. The bumping of the car down over the tussocks of grass on the green upset the petrol-can, and the pipe, which Eli either dropped out of his mouth or, in the confusion of the moment, out of his hand, fell directly on to the spilt petrol. However, if the petrol had not burst alight, Eli would not have thrown himself out neatly and promptly, and would undoubtedly have been gravely injured in the final crash.

"Well, of all the durn' silly things!" Eli said. "To leave an open petrol-can on the floor of a car beside the driving-seat!"

"There's no blame attached to anyone, as far as I can see," Ma Merry said. "George was doing something to the car and Eli was in too much of a hurry to start. So there's no need to bother any more about it. You can't get the car back by going over it again."

"No," Eli agreed, "but we can get the insurance money, I hope. And that's the end of cars for you and me, my girl," he said to Polly.

. . . . .

But it was by no means the end of the affair.

When we had all recovered a little and were sustained by cherry brandy, we went out to re-inspect the wreckage. The sergeant in charge of the hamlet of Cloud, with his head-

quarters in the village of Lambing, now had the situation in hand.

"A nasty smash-up, Mr. Edge. Are you all right?"

"Aye. Funnily enough I am all right. I took a toss out on to the green, but landed soft. I'm a good deal less hurt than last week when I took that tumble in our cowshed. I don't know what's come over me lately."

"It's a nasty smash-up," the sergeant repeated; he had his notebook and the stub of a pencil in his hand. "I'll have to report this. It's a total loss, I'd say." He was a trifle self-important, but I suppose that little enough occurred in his orbit to report: the theft of a few hens, perhaps, some mild hooliganism on the part of village youths, an odd driving offence, but little else.

"I'd say it *is* a total loss, and it is to be hoped the insurance company think so too!" Eli declared.

"They'd best be notified at once."

"I'll have to insure me life if things go on like this, eh, Polly?"

"Don't talk like that, Eli. You've had a wonderful escape."

"Aye, I have this time, but what about next time?"

"There won't be a next time, love."

"Troubles never come singly," quoth Eli; "there's two things happened, there'll be a third."

"Three things have happened to you, Eli. You just missed crashing into the milk-lorry, that was one; you fell in the cowshed, two; and now this, three!" Polly cried triumphantly.

"Nay, I don't count the first," Eli said lugubriously. He looked at me very hard, blinking his bright brown eyes. "Ever since you came, George Sudley, ever since you came," he said. "Do you take bad luck with you wherever you go?"

"Don't be silly," Polly put in quickly. "It's ever since you got the Land Rover, not ever since George came. Now we haven't got the Land Rover any longer, so nothing more can happen to you in it."

"Two accidents," Eli said sonorously, "in less than two weeks. I don't know what to make of it."

Though he was still sniffing around the wreckage the

sergeant was listening all right. "You must take more care, Mr. Edge," he said.

"I'll take care all right," Eli said, repeating, "and I'll take care to insure me life, then maybe there won't be a third!"

During the afternoon two young reporters from the newspaper office in the town came. They wanted, from Mr. Edge's own lips, his story of his narrow escape.

And they got it. Eli was delighted. His mood of depression slipped from him temporarily. He was delighted to tell the story as many times as anyone would care to hear it. The reporters took photographs of the house, of the wreck of the car, and of Polly and Eli standing in front of the great yew tree by my bedroom window, arm in arm.

But when they had gone someone else arrived: the police inspector from the town and his sergeant. I saw them come in a small black car and walk up the green to the farm. I thought maybe it was the insurance people here already. I saw them go into the Edges' living-room and the door was closed.

I got on with the milking.

Presently the bigger of the two men came out to the shed. At closer quarters he was unmistakably a police officer, a large chap. Whatever the weather he invariably wore a very soiled raincoat; he had a pleasant voice, deep and treacly. He had a slow and thoughtful way with him; he would keep his hands in the pockets of his raincoat and look at an object for a very long time as though there were some hidden significance in his contemplation. Whether there was or whether there wasn't, it made you feel hellishly uncomfortable.

I didn't stand up or do anything else when he came in, I simply went on milking and he pulled up the little stoool upon which Polly sat when we were having a session over the milking.

"George Sudley, I believe," he said; "you're the farm hand, I take it. You've been here how many weeks now?"

I told him and he thanked me politely, saying that with regard to this morning's accident the insurance company, he understood, were being asked for the full value of the smashed car and he had no doubt they would want a very complete enquiry indeed. "I thought I'd make myself acquainted with

the facts beforehand," he said. "Now will you kindly give me your version of the occurrence, Mr. Sudley?"

I did so pleasantly enough.

At length he said, "Perhaps you would be good enough to step down to the wreckage with me, there is enough of the car left for you to be able to show me exactly how things were."

So we went down the green together. The floorboards of the Land Rover were burnt up, but the wreckage had been righted and I pointed out exactly where I had put the petrol-can.

"In my opinion," I said, "the can toppled over before the crash. Mr. Edge was in such a flurry he wouldn't notice it. The can wouldn't stay upright a second with the car bumping off down the green. You got badly enough bumped driving down what driveway there is, but he went careering over the edge of the drive, over the grass, down the hill."

"You weren't there to see?"

"No, but I heard about it. He missed the old bath by inches, Polly said."

"Polly?"

"Mrs. Edge."

"I see," the inspector said thoughtfully. "So you think Mr. Edge lost his head, couldn't find the foot brake and forgot about the hand brake?"

"That sort of thing. He's not a young man, his reflexes aren't so good. I was driving with him last week when he very nearly had a crash, he nearly collided with the milk-lorry. He got confused about the controls then, didn't know t'other from which."

"I understand you thought it was due to his iron-studded boots."

"Yes, great clumsy things for driving in when you're not used to it. I've often seen his foot slip off the accelerator."

"Um hum." The inspector prowled round and round the wreck.

"Well, thanks very much, Mr.—er—Sudley."

I was dismissed. But as I walked away he called me back.

"Oh, by the by, you have your driving licence on you, I take it?"

"No, I haven't."

The inspector walked up to me and stood looking down at me with his lips pursed and his finger and thumb pressing his lips slightly together. It was a characteristic mannerism and one which I was to come to know very well.

In the course of time we became great friends, Inspector Hope and I.

"You haven't your driving licence?"

"Not on me, Inspector," I said, and I think I must have worn the faintest of smiles. I do object to being looked down upon from a great height of man; I very much like to be able to score small successes in these circumstances. "But then, I don't need to have it on me for milking cows, do I? I will produce it at once if you would like to see it."

"Thanks very much."

When I came out from my quarters he was staring down into the old bath with as much portent as a fortune-teller gazing into her crystal. "Curious little creatures."

"Er—what?"

"Those little pink U-shaped objects, forming a U first one way, then another, turning themselves completely inside out at least seventy times a minute."

I looked down into the water of the bath and saw the little things in furious bright-orange activity. "Mosquito larvae or something of the kind," I said.

"That what they are? Well, well, what a waste of effort it all is, isn't it?"

He straightened himself suddenly and shot out his hand for the licence. But he did not waste any time studying it, he handed it back to me after the merest glance. "Thanks very much," he said again, and went with measured tread down the green to his car where his *aide* stood at the ready.

I did not return at once to the cows, but stood looking down into the bath, watching the curiously sensuous convolutions of the tiny larvae.

CHAPTER X

THE daily paper was delivered at the gate; in fine weather it was stuck between two slats of the gate and in the wet it was put below a large slate with a stone on top, and there it stayed until someone took the trouble to go down for it. This particular morning, however, Ma Merry brought it up. Her reason for coming was immediately apparent: she was waving another newspaper, published daily in the town, which the Merrys took, but not the Edges. She was in a great state of excitement; all the photographs that the reporters had taken were published on one of the middle pages and there was a story at least three inches long of Farmer Edge's narrow escape.

Eli was entranced, he was like a child on Christmas morning. "Well, I never! Who'd have thought it! Our Eli!" he chuckled. "We must order a few copies of this, Polly," he said; "we must send one to your Mum and Dad and another to me sister Maggie."

The newspaper was spread on the table in the living-room and we all clustered round it.

"Well, I never!" Eli exclaimed, over and over again. "Well, I never did! I'm not such a bad-looking chap after all, eh, Polly girl? It was a good idea putting me teeth in! Mr. and Mrs. Eli Edge, eh? Hee, hee, hee!"

Mr. and Mrs. Eli Edge! Yes, the reporters who had taken that photograph, I reflected grimly, had a brand of humour entirely their own. Mentally I framed the kind of remark that must have been made about it in the press-room of that newspaper.

Mrs. Merry nodded and smiled as though she personally were responsible. "Look at the great big headlines!" she pointed out. "Well, Eli, however does it feel to see your name in print?"

"It feels fine," Eli declared.

"You didn't have a photograph in the paper when you were married?"

"No," Eli agreed, "but they've made up for it now!"

I began to sicken of it all and turned away.

"Polly," Eli remarked, "next time you're in town you must buy an album. We'll cut out all these photographs and stick 'em in, and the headlines and the column an' all. We'll keep it to show to our children, eh?"

Polly did not raise her face from the newspaper, but the tips of her ears became a deep-coral pink.

"That's right, Eli," Ma Merry chuckled, "that's the stuff." She turned to look at me. I had stopped by the door into the scullery and was fiddling aimlessly with an ornament on the mahogany sideboard. "That's right, Eli," Ma Merry said, "you keep it to show your children, they'll be right proud of you!"

Polly looked up then and across the room at me, and for a minute it would seem that there was no one in the world other than she and I. And then Ma Merry joined us, as it were, and suddenly the look seemed to be hanging round our necks in torn fragments.

She stood there in her smart hat, a short, rather absurd figure, looking from Polly to me and from me to Polly; it was as though the two of us had asked her advice and she was giving it. As Eli drooled over the newspaper she looked directly at us and said, "Yes, Polly, you must take care of the photographs for your children, and in time they will show their children, who will say, 'If our grand-dad had been killed that time there wouldn't have been Edges at Hill Farm now!' "

Ma Merry was sane and wise and kind.

But I said viciously: "So what? At the present rate of decay there won't be any Hill Farm for the next generation of Edges."

Polly looked shocked, Mrs. Merry looked grieved and Eli simply grunted: "What's the man talking about?"

I flung out of the room.

. . . . .

Next generation of Edges indeed!

It was because of Ma Merry that I was there at all. She had wanted me to stay so that I should fall in love with Polly and her son would be saved. Now the woman regretted it, she

was as good as telling me to get out and leave Polly and Eli to beget children! But it was too late. Things had gone too far. There would never be any Edge children at Hill Farm. Or grandchildren.

I went ranging round the farm, mouth dry, ears singing, stamping up and down the fields for two hours or more.

When I got back I went to the kitchen for my meal, but there was no meal ready. Polly was sitting at the table in the living-room with a writing-pad in front of her and Eli was lying back on the mud-coloured sofa, still gloating over the paper.

"What exactly shall we say to the insurance company?" Polly asked me. "How do you put it, George?"

This was what I needed. Polly must go out and Eli would be left alone with me. "I shouldn't write," I said; "you must go into town and report it in person, Polly. Don't you agree, Mr. Edge?"

"How can we?" Polly said.

"John Merry would take you. I was meaning you, Polly. There would be no need for Mr. Edge to go. Once the thing is reported the agent will come out and have a look at the wreckage and start enquiries. Mr. Edge can see him then."

"He's right," Eli put in unexpectedly. "We'll get John Merry to run us into town and report it in person, Polly. Much the best thing to do."

Hell, I groaned, that wasn't what I intended. "There's no need for you to go, Mr. Edge . . ."

But I had started something. Eli would not be deflected. He was determined to go. So Polly ran down to Cloud Farm and fixed up for John Merry to run them into the town in the mid-afternoon.

By the time they had gone, the mood in which I would have been delighted to fell Eli to the ground before me with an axe or anything else I had to hand had left me. But there was no void, it was replaced by a determination. Eli had had two narrow escapes and, as everybody knows, "troubles never come singly". He should have a third accident, and this one would be fatal, and everyone would say, "Poor old chap, he had it coming to him, you could see that."

I waited until I saw them drive off with the willing John Merry and then I started my tour of the house.

At the immediate top of the stairs was a room with a patterned lino on the floor. There was no bed in it but a large washstand with a marble top. There were various jugs and basins about and I took it that this was the room they used, except on Saturday nights, as a wash-room.

Then there was the vast landing with its great oak coffer and the little stuffed owl on the top, under its glass dome, blinking harmlessly enough in the daylight. I lifted down the owl and opened the lid of the oak chest. It was fairly heavy and a musty smell came out when I opened the lid. There was a black sateen eiderdown on top and below about half a dozen clean blankets but nothing else. You could conceal at least four bodies in that chest, I reflected. But for how long? One week.

I put down the lid and carefully lifted back the little owl and the brass candlestick.

I crossed the landing to the Edges' bedroom and stood for a moment with my hand on the knob before going inside. Then I went in.

There was a huge four-poster bed with a mahogany tester. It was "done up" in pink. The pinkest of pink art silk. There was a pink frill round the top and another frill all round the sides of the bed, acting as a valance. There was a great pink eiderdown on the bed and above the eiderdown on one side of the bed a linen case with "Pyjamas" embroidered thereon in pink lettering and on the other side a pink nightdress case which I was sure had belonged to the late Mrs. Edge. Indeed, I felt sure the whole room was the handiwork of the late Mrs. Edge. The idea of Eli, great husky that he was, lying in that bed, no matter who lay beside him, was not merely absurd but incongruous and entirely nauseating.

Polly's dressing-table was a grand mahogany affair with an elaborate looking-glass and a great many tiny drawers, but her possessions arranged thereon were of the most simple: a little pink-backed wooden brush and a pink comb, a box of powder, a jar of cream, a small silver hand looking-glass with angels' heads embossed on the back and an absolutely ludi-

crous photograph of Eli Edge. The photograph must have been taken twenty-five years ago; he wore a high collar with turned-back corners, a stringy tie and upon his face a most wooden expression. He glared at me out of the cheap frame, and I have no doubt I glared back at him.

On either side of the chimney-piece were two pottery dogs with long ears, bright orange patches and smug faces, one sat facing in one direction and the other was identical except that it faced the other way. Above, in the exact centre, hung a text framed in gilt and heavily garnished with clasped hands, lovers' knots and a great many forget-me-nots. I have known people who would be anxious to possess such a piece; hanging where it did, in the setting in which I found it, it gave me a curious feeling, a feeling of trespass. "THOU GOD SEEST ME" it said.

I left the room. I did not want to see any more of the upstairs rooms so I went down. I went into the scullery and opened the door leading into the larder, or the old dairy. I stood for a long time at the top of the steps which led down just inside the door, staring at the stone floor. It would make a nasty fall. There were five stone steps; they were steep and narrow, and in the middle they were considerably worn. If someone had had a lot of drink, someone with a leg already stiff from sciatica, they would find the steps difficult to negotiate. They would be almost certain to fall. If, alternatively, the door were not left shut but hanging loosely on the latch, anyone in a state of drink, fumbling with the handle, might be suddenly precipitated forward and lurch head first on to the stone floor.

But then, Eli did not drink.

I looked round the scullery. In the corner stood the copper, the heart of the house, an evil little tyrant. The fire beneath it was lighted every day except Sundays. It was filled by a hose-pipe from the one tap in the house over the shallow sink; the hose lay across the floor all day for everyone to trip over. All the hot water used for washing was obtained from the copper. A large galvanized ladle lay beside the wooden lid. The lid was woolly with age and use and steam. When you wanted hot water you raised the lid and helped yourself from the steaming

depths. If you were short of stature you had to stand on tiptoe and stretch a little to get to the water. If you were tall your foot might slip and you would go head first into the copper. But then, of course, your foot wouldn't slip, not if you had lived all your life at Hill Farm and used the copper since you were a boy. No, your foot wouldn't slip. Using the copper would be perfectly safe.

Above the copper on a huge hook on the wall hung a curious object of the colour which was described in my paint-box as a child as "gamboge". It was more or less round and had a kind of large lip. It was the bath. On Saturday evenings the sacred rite of Edge-bathing would take place. A curtain was hung over the scullery window, the doors bolted and the bath was filled by many dippings of the galvanized ladle into the copper; then the abluting Edge would step into the bath and stand calf-deep whilst soaping itself all over. The bath would be emptied by repeated plungings of the ladle and the process would take place all over again for the second Edge to bath. This was how it had been done for a great many years and was still done. No danger there, unless from the draughts that whistled and shrieked around the house on a winter's night. No comfort, but no danger.

I went outside and lifted the lid of the well, looking down into its depths. If Eli were to disappear, the well would be one of the first places to be searched.

I went back into the living-room and took Eli's gun from the cupboard beside the fireplace; it was not, of course, loaded. Now would be the moment for the German, Eyvind, to appear, so I carried the gun into my own quarters.

What I then did was so deliberate and carried out so quickly that I think the idea must have lain festering at the back of my mind for some time. It was quite a good rifle to be in the possession of a parsimonious small farmer of Edge's calibre, a .22 Walther auto-loading rifle. A certain peer of the realm to whom in the course of my chequered career I had been general factotum and handyman had had one exactly the same. The magazine holds five cartridges and the gun has a standard pull. The pull, however, can be regulated by a key on the hammer. Some people like their pull to be light and

others like it heavy. By turning the key anti-clockwise as far as it would go, the pull on the trigger would be instantaneous —that is, as soon as the gun was loaded it would become highly dangerous, the very slightest knock would cause it to go off, firing the whole contents of the magazine.

I got my hand towel and gave the rifle a good polish all round the handle and where I had been touching it. I polished the tiny key, too. Then I put two clean handkerchiefs over each hand and, holding the gun in my left hand through the handkerchief, I held the key in my right, also through the handkerchief, and turned it anti-clockwise as far as it would go. Then I put the key back into the case and propped the gun against the wall of the fireside cupboard as I had found it, shut the cupboard door and went back to my quarters feeling a lot better. The best thing I could do now, I thought, was to dismiss the small incident of my interference with the rifle completely from my mind. Then, if an accident were to happen to Eli, I would be as astonished as everyone else.

I was glad I had not shot Eli point blank, it would have been a stupid thing to do. What is more, I would have been a murderer and no fit consort for Polly. As it was, if Eli were shot dead when out shooting alone, with his own gun, it was obviously the result of an accident.

Quod Erat Demonstrandum, or Quite Easily Done.

I went off whistling to get in the first cow.

. . . . .

I did actually succeed in dismissing the incident completely from my mind and, heaven knows, enough happened to cause me to forget it. From the afternoon when I was left alone at the farm until the actual going-off of the rifle I gave only one fleeting thought to the gun and to the hair-trigger I had caused it to have. So completely did I forget, that when it did at last go off I was, I suppose, more astonished than anyone else.

CHAPTER XI

THE outstanding disadvantage of not having the Land Rover any longer was that it no longer afforded a legitimate excuse for being alone with Polly for any length of time, and the immediate result was that Polly and I had our first real quarrel. At least, I like to think that was the cause of our quarrel, nothing else.

Madge Clay came, carrying a sack, ostensibly for some more corn for her fowls.

"What, again?" Eli shouted. "What do you do with your corn, Miss Clay? Light your fires?"

"You should see the eggs," Madge replied; "honestly, they're so big you'd think an ostrich had laid them. I believe in giving the hens as much as they can eat."

"You'll have me in gaol afore you've done," Eli grumbled, but Madge was a great favourite with him, there was a twinkle in his eye. He lumbered up into the loft over the scullery where he kept his not very secret store.

Madge turned to me instantly. "When are you coming over to The Flagpole again, George? My brother is home at the moment, I would like you to meet him."

"Why?" I said sulkily.

"Oh, I dunno, I think you'd get on well together. He's a nice chap."

"But I'm not," I said.

"Don't be silly. When will you come?"

"Now the Land Rover's smashed up, how could I get there?"

"Eli has a bicycle you could borrow. You could be over in half an hour easily this weather."

"I'm no good to you, girl," I murmured. "Why do you bother?"

"Because I like you, George. You amuse me."

"I do, do I?" I said automatically, thinking.

"There's an amusing little pub we'll go to, it's called the Pigeon Pie, run by some people I know."

"All right," I said, worn down at last, "I'll come, provided Eli will lend me his bike."

Eli was none too pleased. I daresay that if Madge had not been there he would have had a few succinct remarks to make with reference to "gadding about" and so forth, but Madge's semi-flirtatious attitude to him flattered him slightly. I think he felt no end of a dog when she was about.

I carried the sack of corn down the green to the car for her. The wreck of the Land Rover had been salvaged by the local garage; only the mark on the wall and a blackening of the grass remained to show where it had happened.

Madge had chaffed Eli about his escape, now she said soberly, "It seems Eli was intended to live; I don't know how the old boy managed to roll out of the runaway car without hurting himself, he must have a charmed life."

Her dog was sitting up on the front seat looking very handsome. I heaved the sack over into the back and Madge got into the driving-seat.

"By the way, there's a job going over at Potter St. Mary. I happen to know the Duke of Retford's agent and he was telling me they want a man to supervise some drainage scheme the Duke is having done in the park."

"I'm no good at drains," I said curtly.

"Oh, George, you are in a nasty mood this morning! It's land drainage; it is all being done by his own men and is going to take months. I know you're a thoroughly good all-round man. I told the agent I knew of someone who might do. They're paying well and you could be a paying guest with me."

So that was it!

She started up the engine. "Well, anyway, think it over. You're no farm hand and it's no good pretending you are. It's the silk-purse-and-the-sow's-ear situation reversed."

"Thanks for the compliment," I said; "you're a decent sort, Madge, but——"

"I know. You've 'got to lead your own life', haven't you, George? Well, so long. I'll be seeing you."

. . . . .

I thought I understood women. But I didn't understand Polly.

Perhaps I would have understood her if she had not been so wildly beautiful so that when I looked at her my head sang, my mouth was dry and there was a dull throbbing at my temples.

She came out to the cowshed when I was doing the afternoon milking. The sun was blazing in through the open door, but Polly stood in the cool shadows looking so lovely that the radiance from her seemed to render the sun's rays tawdry.

"George, you're not listening."

"No, I can't listen when I'm looking—at you."

"I said John wants me to go to a social the Young Farmers are giving tonight. I wondered if you would come too, and Mary Tiffin might go with us. Four of us."

"I shall have to look in my engagement book," I said, milking away.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going out tonight," I said, "pub crawling. Eli is lending me his bike. Surely you knew that, Polly?"

She had known it, of course. It dawned on me with a great delight that my little darling heart was jealous. I jumped up from my milking-stool and clasped my arms round her, kissing the top of her bent head whilst she clung to me, moaning gently, "I love you so terribly, George, so terribly."

I suppose that has been said a great many times, but now I know that it has never been said with greater meaning.

After a long time I said, "This decides it, Polly." I slipped back into the old worn-out argument with renewed hope. This time I was sure I could persuade her to come away with me. If she really loved me, as she did, I could not see, nor do I still see, how anything else could matter. I remembered the job of which Madge Clay had spoken and told her about it. "It is only temporary, but it might lead to something better. In fact if I had a chance to show I was some good I am sure they would keep me on for something else. I can work when I want to."

But for some reason or other Polly seemed angry. Quite

suddenly we both became tense and overwrought, and then we were quarrelling, arguing, accusing. Polly said why was I making myself cheap, why was I touting myself round the county, why couldn't I be content with the job I had? And I, aghast at her unreasonableness, said that surely it was obvious why I couldn't stay at Hill Farm? Polly said oh yes, she could see it all now, they weren't good enough for me; and I, even more horrified, said she was talking like a common little slut. And Polly said if that was how I felt I had better go. And I said far better go than stay in the ridiculous situation I found myself; what did she think I was, anyway? And Polly said an ex-convict.

And that tore it.

Even the cow I had been milking shuffled uncomfortably.

"There!" I said at last. "Thank goodness we have found it out."

"What?" she whispered, frightened.

"Just what it would be like if we were married."

Polly whimpered. "It wouldn't be like that, George," she said; "it is like this because we *aren't* married."

I squatted down again on my stool to finish off my cow. I was shaking, I think probably my face was deathly white. Polly possibly was as white as myself, but I did not look at her. I saw only the red clogs and her absurd ankles.

. . . . .

I had bought myself a yellow waistcoat, canary-yellow socks to match and dark-brown suède shoes, and as I put these on I felt a certain masochistic pleasure at the almost physical pain our quarrel was causing. Polly would be dressing to go out too, I thought. Perhaps she would be putting on her white silk blouse which she wore open at the neck, her full bright green skirt and the tiny brown sandals. Or maybe her Hungarian blouse which was so wickedly transparent and the little green bow in her hair which she had begun to wear recently and which she had told me meant "I have found a lover."

Thinking about that tiny green bow, I broke a nearly new

shoelace and swore violently. I tied the shoe all anyhow and bounded out of my quarters and across the farmyard to the barn for Eli's bicycle. The tyres needed inflating, and when I had done this I whistled, defiantly light-hearted, as I wheeled it across the yard, mounted and rode down the green. John Merry was backing his car out into the lane; Mary Tiffin was watching him, looking, I thought, a little forlorn. She was as pretty as a daisy, but who was going to look at the daisy? Not John Merry, his eyes would be drawn to the camellia.

I gave a fleeting thought as to how we would all have fitted into the M.G. As I shut the gate behind me, Merry called, "Is Polly coming, Sudley?"

"No idea!" I replied nonchalantly and rode off, still whistling. Halfway along the road to Lambing I suddenly remembered my wallet which I had left in the pocket of the waistcoat I was not wearing. I wasn't going to allow Madge Clay and her brother to pay for everything, so I turned round and pelted back hell for leather. As I turned into the lane the M.G. passed me, turning out, and I remember seeing the Tiffin wave half-heartedly, but I did not wave back. I left the bicycle at the gate and hurried up the green and into my quarters. I had sixteen pounds in my wallet. I counted out five, left the rest in a book, and, replacing the five in the case, I put it in my hip pocket, and set off once more for The Flagpole.

I remember very little about the sailor Clay; as sometimes happens in a family which consists only of a boy and a girl, the girl had everything, the looks, the energy and the vivacity. I had a good deal to drink that night and brother Clay might well have been wiped clean off my memory's slate, but I can just recall pale receding hair and an obliging smile; anyway, it doesn't matter, for he went back to his ship immediately after our party and doesn't impinge again upon my story.

I did the seven miles to Potter St. Mary in a remarkably short time; the road was easy, flat and with a good surface. Then we zipped about in Madge's car, all three of us squeezed into the front seat, having dinner at one pub and calling at three others. Madge wanted me to finish off the evening by going back to The Flagpole and having a final drink there.

But I wouldn't. In spite of all I had drunk, the pain of my quarrel with Polly was still like a knife in my chest. "I must get back," I said. But Madge declared that she would not let me ride back seven miles alone, so we tied Eli's bicycle to the luggage-grid and she drove me back as far as the post office.

It was a magic kind of evening. At ten-thirty it was barely dark and, as we sped along between the hedgerows that were all decked out like a bride, the air heavy with a voluptuous scent, I cursed myself, as I had done before, because I could not make love to Madge. I think she, too, was a little upset, for she dropped me at the post office without a word. There was none of the hilarity of our last parting at Lambing post office.

"Good night, Madge."

"Good night, George."

We parted soberly.

The Merry party had arrived home. I saw the light in the kitchen at Cloud Farm and I heard John's voice as I passed. So Polly, too, would be home. Have you had a *nice time*? I thought savagely as I wheeled the bicycle up the green. I put the bicycle away in the barn and noticed, as I walked across the farmyard, that there was no light either in the living-room nor in the Edges' bedroom; and wondering why, I turned the corner and rounded the yew tree to my own quarters.

Polly was standing on the house side of the great yew, close to its blackness. I couldn't see her face very well, but I saw the gleaming white of her silk blouse.

"What are you doing there?"

"I've just come back."

"Where is Eli?"

"I don't know. I haven't been in." And then she whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." And suddenly, against my chest where the pain had been all night, was Polly's soft breast and her bright head was on my shoulder.

"Come with me, Polly."

I took her hand and we walked behind the house, across the little field and into the copse where bracken grew amongst the silver birches. The trunks of the trees shone silver in the moonlight, like the pipes of some great organ, and the night sky arched over us far above like a misty, vaulted roof.

It was like making love in a cathedral.

After a very long time, somewhere, infinitely far off, we heard a dog howling—howling to the setting moon.

When we left the copse I think we were both transfigured; I know Polly was, her beauty was unearthly. We walked back down across the field, hand in hand.

Polly's voice had deepened some tones, it was slightly husky. "What a noise Argo is making," she said.

Argo sounded like his own presentation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It was no longer a bark but a prolonged high wail.

I shivered.

"Are you cold?

"No, not a bit. But Argo makes my blood run cold. Or perhaps someone is walking over my grave."

Argo was round the front, in the farmyard. We approached the house at the back. As we stood within a few yards of the house, in the shadow of it, on the north side, Polly took my face between her hands. "Now you are mine, George," she whispered.

"We belong to each other for ever, Polly," I whispered.

"Whatever happens now you are mine."

"And you'll come away with me?"

She nodded.

"Tomorrow?"

"Perhaps."

"Good night, my beloved."

But she seemed reluctant to let me go. She walked with me round the back of the house and stood by the yew tree whilst I let myself in at the front door.

In high spirits I began to get ready for bed, tossing off my new shoes, jacket, waistcoat. I thought, what the devil is wrong with Argo? I threw up my bedroom window and looked out. To my great surprise Polly was still standing, facing my window, beside the yew.

"I'm frightened," she said. "I hate that noise Argo is making."

Together we went round the side of the house. Argo was sitting on his haunches, his nose pointing straight up into the sky, looking remarkably like a wolf.

"Shut up!" I shouted. "Stop that row! Argo!" and caught at his collar.

Polly tried the door into the living-room. It was locked.

She ran to me and whispered that we were locked out. "He must know about us, George," she said.

I tried the door. It was indeed either locked or bolted or both. I tried the other two outside doors, they were both locked. My first feeling was one of deep relief. Eli knew about us and had locked Polly out, had, indeed, turned her out. Now we would have to fend for ourselves, the issue was decided.

I said: "But why didn't he lock me out of my quarters? Why didn't he lock the whole place up?"

Polly said: "It's very late, George. What time is it?"

It was nearly three o'clock.

Polly was shaking from head to foot, her teeth were chattering. I tried to comfort her. She said, "Let us go to your room and try to have a little sleep."

So we went back to my room and lay down on my bed. Argo lay on the floor beside us, his muzzle down between his paws and an uneasy red glint in his watchful eyes. I did not blow out the candle. Polly lay with her eyes wide open staring up at the ceiling. I think I dozed a little but when the dawn came, presently, we lay hand in hand and planned our future.

It was a strange situation. I wanted to get up and go away at once without seeing Eli. I had so few possessions; I wanted to go as I had come, with a brown-paper parcel under my arm. But Polly would not hear of it. "It would be cowardly of me to go like that," she said. "I must face up to Eli and let him say what he has to say to me."

So I left her lying on my bed and went, out of sheer habit, to milk the cows. At nine o'clock there was no sign of Eli. All the downstairs windows were shut. Eli had done the job thoroughly, I thought, he wasn't going to have Polly creeping in through a window. I was astonished, really. I would never have thought Eli would take that line. I would not have guessed for one moment that Eli knew about us, and, knowing about us, I would not have thought he would have acted as he had. He seemed to be acting out of character. This wasn't, I felt, the way he would deal with the situation.

At half past nine Polly said that something must be wrong, we must fetch John Merry. "For heaven's sake!" I said. "You always fly to the Merrys. I am as capable of breaking down the door as John Merry, I should hope!"

"George, I don't want you to break in," Polly said. I thought I saw what she meant. Reluctantly I let her go down to Cloud Farm and fetch help.

Surprisingly enough it was Pa Merry who arrived, with a large coal-hammer. He should have gone to business by nine-thirty but this morning a car was calling for him later on to take him to a civic luncheon in the town. He was dressed in a black jacket and striped trousers. John was out with the tractor on the bottom field so he, Merry, would break in, if necessary. What did I think was wrong? Edge had a heart attack?

We went round the house. The scullery door was bolted, the door round the back out into the small field was apparently locked and bolted, the door from my quarters into the Edges' living-room was bolted, though I did not remember having seen a bolt on it. Pa Merry thrust his whole bulk against the door, but it was obviously not going to give way under force.

The Edges' bedroom window, though closed, was not fastened so we fetched a ladder and Pa Merry climbed up it and squeezed himself in. We heard him walk across the lino in the bedroom and open the door, then we could hear nothing more. I looked at Polly. Though the sun was shining and it was brilliantly warm in the yard she was shivering again and her teeth were chattering; I could see she was making an effort to control it. "What do you think has happened?" she whispered.

. . . . .

Eli had died, that is what had happened. The thing I had longed for had miraculously happened.

Pa Merry drew the bolt of the living-room door, we heard him snap it back and he threw the door wide open. He was a shocking colour.

"Eli is dead," he said, and staggered to the fence in front of which we stood, holding on to it for support. "I'm not

feeling so good myself." He brought out a spotless white handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Given me quite a turn."

Polly was about to run in, but I put a restraining hand on her arm.

"No, don't go." I remember thinking, shot himself or something of the kind, and said: "If he has shot himself it will be nasty."

Pa Merry must have heard what I said. He finished wiping his face and folded his handkerchief carefully, putting it back into exact position in his breast pocket. "No, not shot himself," he said. "Died. He's quite cold. There's a couple of dead cats besi e him on the sofa! Where were you all night, Polly?"

"I couldn't get in. I had to spend the night on the sofa in the front parlour."

That was the little room across the passage in my quarters which I used as my sitting-room. I mentally saluted Polly, she had been quick about that.

"You should have come to us when you found Eli had locked you out. Why the devil did he lock you out?"

"It wasn't me he locked out," Polly said. "He's been nervous since his accident, since his two accidents."

There was an extraordinary hiatus. We all stood by the fence, staring at the open door of the living-room.

"Look out!" Pa Merry exclaimed suddenly. "Polly's fainting!"

Polly, her head lolling to one side, was slipping slowly down. Between us Pa Merry and I got her to the bench beside the door; she began to come round at once.

"Keep your head down, there's a good girl," Pa Merry said, thrusting her head down between her knees.

"It's nothing," Polly murmured. "Everything went black for a moment."

"I'll look after her, Sudley. You go and 'phone for the doctor. You'd better use our 'phone."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you sure Edge is dead?"

Pa Merry jerked his head. "Go in and see for yourself."

I went into the living-room. It felt hot and stuffy but

there was no particular smell. The window was, of course, shut, the moquette curtain hung, as usual, over the doorway into the lobby beside my quarters and the door through from the living-room into the scullery was shut. This, however, was not unusual, it was always shut when anyone was sitting in the living-room. Eli was lying on the mud-coloured sofa as I had seen him so many times. His eyes were shut and one arm was hanging over the side of the sofa. He did not look dead at all, his face was, indeed, more rosy than usual. He merely looked set. I touched his hand and started back in alarm, it was stone cold with the penetrating cold of marble. There were two cats lying beside him, apparently asleep.

"Be careful not to touch anything, Sudley," Pa Merry's voice warned from the door.

I staggered out into the clean air. "I never knew Eli had a bad heart, Polly."

She did not answer, but asked, "Is he really dead, George?"

I assured her.

"Maybe it's a stroke," Pa Merry said. "Anyway, get a move on, Sudley. Go and 'phone the doctor. If you can't get Edge's own man get someone else. But get them here quickly. I don't like this."

. . . . . .

It was a very bad day indeed. Eli's body was not removed until well on into the evening. Four doctors in all inspected the scene, the last two being the police doctor and the Home Office pathologist. The local police sergeant came, the Chief District Commissioner and finally my friend Inspector Hope.

By the evening it was quite clear that no one but Polly and myself imagined Eli had died of anything so simple as a heart attack or a stroke. The two dead cats loomed large in my own mind, and though none of us mentioned them I am sure the others thought of them continuously. We told our story, over and over again, separately and together. We each described how we had spent the evening, Polly with John Merry and Mary Tiffin, I with Madge Clay and her brother.

Polly had returned first. She had tried the door of the living-room and found it locked. She had tried the other doors and found them locked too. She had not been in any way disturbed. Though the doors were not usually locked she knew that since his accident of a few days previously Eli had been in a highly nervous state. She was not at all surprised to find the doors locked. She thought that Eli had gone to sleep unintentionally before she returned and in order not to disturb him she had gone round to the front of the house and into the front parlour and had spent the night on the sofa there.

I had returned shortly after Polly. I had not gone into the front parlour nor had I tried any of the doors of the house. I had undressed and got straight into bed. I had risen to milk the cows as usual, and only at about nine o'clock, when my breakfast was not forthcoming, had I begun to wonder if anything was wrong.

Up to a point it was the simple truth, anything beyond that point, I think we both felt, was our own business. What happened between Polly and me that night was "such stuff as dreams are made on" and would shed no light at all upon how Eli died.

The actual time at which Eli died caused a good deal of speculation. It seems that in some cases the pathologist can give an accurate estimate of the time of death and in other cases he can give only a vague estimate, depending upon the biochemical condition of the deceased. The pathologist gave no opinion when he came to view the corpse, but said he might be able to tell us after the post mortem.

Ma Merry was very much in evidence. She made innumerable journeys up and down the green with trays of tea, and that night she took Polly down to Cloud Farm. "She can't stay here with you, George, it wouldn't do," she said.

I badly wanted to be alone with Polly. There were certain things I felt I must ask her and I felt sure that she wanted to ask me things too. I think we were all bewildered and slightly mystified by the sensation Eli's death was causing. No one would say how or of what he had died.

"What are they all being so mysterious about?" Mary Tiffin asked me at supper at Cloud Farm.

"I guess it is just because they don't know what he has died of, and until they find out they don't like to admit it."

But I had a bit of a shock when I arrived back at Hill Farm after supper. They brought out the beautiful new gas cooker, carried it down the green and put it into a van, the cylinders followed it and lastly came Inspector Hope. He locked the door into the living-room and put the key into his pocket. Then he turned and saw me watching him.

"I'm leaving the place sealed up, except for your quarters, Sudley. You'll be spending the night in your own room, I take it? We'll be round in the morning."

"Look," I said, "what is it all about?"

"We shall know everything in due course," the inspector said briskly.

"But is there any idea that Mr. Edge didn't die from natural causes?"

"There is indeed, and it is a good deal more than an idea."

"Are you thinking perhaps he gassed himself?"

"Gassed? Why should you think that?"

I controlled the urge to be sarcastic. I said simply: "Because you have taken away the new cooker. Because we were warned about the gas when it was put in. Because the two cats are also dead. And because . . ." I paused.

"Yes?"

I was remembering certain chemical facts I had learned at school, things about haemoglobin and the action of oxygen thereon. "Because his face was so unnaturally pink."

". . . as in coal-gas poisoning," the inspector prompted.

". . . and as in poisoning by any gas, butane included. I was always telling them about adequate ventilation," I went on. "Why on earth were all the windows and doors tight shut on a lovely evening like last evening?"

"We intend to find out," Inspector Hope said, eyeing me. "You had warned them about ventilation, had you?"

"Why, yes. I knew the gas was highly poisonous. It wasn't the best kind of compressed gas, but we had to get what was available and this particular make is odourless. In the better kinds I believe they have introduced a distinctive smell, but this one really didn't smell. I've often warned

them about keeping some ventilation when the stove was on. My God!" I exclaimed. "Did Eli do it deliberately?"

"You mean suicide?"

I said: "They knew all about the possible dangers of the stove, even young Merry warned them about it when it was first installed. In any case, the thing was pretty well foolproof; as long as the room was well ventilated and the taps were firm enough not to get turned on accidentally nothing could happen." Pause, then I said, "Mr. Edge must have gassed himself deliberately, Inspector." I probably looked as astonished as I felt.

"You think that surprising, do you?"

"Indeed I do. He wasn't the one to kill himself, by any means, painless or otherwise. Why, look how delighted he was only the other day when he was unhurt after falling out of the runaway car! He was too contented, too pleased with himself to want to commit suicide."

"Well, that's very interesting, Mr. Sudley. I'm pleased to have your opinion on that."

As I record this conversation the words spoken by the inspector look as though they were spoken sceptically. But they were not. There was no nasty edge to his voice. He was a good sort, was Inspector Hope. Still is.

I enlarged upon my thesis. "Eli Edge was the very last man to commit suicide," I said. "I'm not much of a hand at psychology, but anyone the least bit interested in their fellow creatures can tell you those who would be more likely to commit suicide than others."

"And nearly always be wrong."

"Wrong sometimes, perhaps. But I'm not wrong in this. My God!" I repeated; I had remembered something else. "What about the life insurance policy he had taken out?"

"We are looking into that," Inspector Hope said. There seemed nothing more to say, but Inspector Hope was reluctant to leave me. No doubt he was quite ready to pick up any hints I might drop.

"Or had he taken it out?" I went on. "He said he was going to." I shook my head thoughtfully. "No," I reflected, "I don't get it at all."

The inspector cleared his throat. "We haven't altogether ruled out the idea of foul play," he said.

"Foul play?" I think I must have looked blank, my mind was still running on the absurd suicide theory. Foul play? Oh, murder.

"You mean murder?"

"I do," the inspector said, almost apologetically.

Who was I to be discussing murder with a police inspector? I knew very well who I was, and so, possibly, did he. I looked at him very straightly, though I am aware that the greater the criminal the straighter the look, and said: "Well, if it is murder you're thinking about you can rule out *me*. In this case it is a physical impossibility. I can't be in two places at once. I've given you details of my whereabouts and my movements very exactly, Inspector, and you can check up on them."

The inspector said lightly: "That's all right, Sudley. You don't have to worry. We have already done so."

CHAPTER XII

THE farm had to be kept going. I was busy enough for the next two days. On the morning after Eli's death John Merry ran Polly over to her mother and father and the next day he brought her back for the coroner's enquiry which was held in the committee room at Lambing village school.

Polly's mother was not with her but her influence was clearly visible for Polly turned up as the Compleat Widow encased in black and looking more lovely than I had ever seen her. She was very pale, her eyes seemed even larger and her hair gave drama to her appearance, it foamed out from under her small black hat like a fire out of control.

No sooner had proceedings opened than the police asked for an adjournment pending further enquiries. So there was nothing for me to do but to mount Eli's bicycle and go back to Hill Farm, where I knew the crone would be drearily swabbing the stone floor of the scullery just as she had been the first day I came.

But she had finished swabbing and had departed, leaving her sackcloth apron hanging behind the door. So I took the great pail of eggs I had collected during the last two days and began to scrub them with a soft brush under the cold tap in the scullery. I dried each one and put it in the crate for the packing station.

I had been working for about half an hour when there was a step outside. It was Polly. "Well, George?"

"Well, Polly?"

"I've been talking to the Merrys. You're to stay with them and Mary Tiffin is coming up here to keep me company. I'll get your meals, the same as before, but you will sleep there."

There was nothing but "Oh" to say.

"Mum and Dad want me to go to them, but this is my home and I want to stay here. Mum and Dad think I am still a child. Mum treated me just like she did when I had measles." She took off her funny little hat and shook out her hair.

"Well, it suits me all right," I said. "It is quite a good arrangement. So long as we don't sleep under the same roof I suppose there is no question of sex rearing its ugly head."

"Don't talk like that," she said sharply. "Do you know how they think Eli died?"

"Gas poisoning?"

"Yes. There was a dried-up pan on the stove which had had milk in it. The milk had boiled over and put out the light and the gas leaked out into the room all night long. It would still have been pouring out when Mr. Merry found Eli if the cylinder hadn't been empty."

"That's how it happened!" I exclaimed. "You remember, Polly, the first day you had the stove you let the milk boil over and it put out the light and you came in and found the gas on and unlighted. Remember?"

"Yes, I do remember. I've remembered that all along. I've been so very careful not to turn the gas too high so that it would not happen again."

"My heavens! The old gaffer was right! Eli had got it coming to him. Remember what he told Eli when the Rover crashed? Good lord, Polly, it makes me go all goosey." I

shivered. "There's something queer about the whole thing. No wonder Argo was making such a noise, it gave him the willies, too."

Polly ran a hand across her white forehead. "I wish you'd stop talking like that, George. Eli may have been nothing to you, but do remember he is—was—my husband!"

I shut up at that and bent to my job with the eggs.

Presently Inspector Hope arrived. "You're going to see a good bit of me for a while, Sudley."

I said: "I'm as keen as you are to get to the bottom of this. I'll do all I can to help you, Inspector."

"I'll question you and Mrs. Edge together this time, and then perhaps we'll get somewhere."

So we went into the living-room and the inspector sat down on Eli's sofa and Polly sat beside him and I leaned against the chimney-piece. I must say the inspector behaved as though we were three directors of a firm all working together for the good of the company.

"Now," he said, "on the face of it this looks like an accident, the sort of thing that could happen to anyone. Death by misadventure. And it probably is. There are one or two small facts that make us chaps wonder if, perhaps, it is what it seems. Firstly there's the locking-up. Mrs. Edge says the place was not locked up very thoroughly as a rule. They bolted the three outside doors before retiring at night if they remembered to do so, and if they didn't remember, well—the place was left unlocked all night. Now, why should Mr. Edge lock the doors on a perfectly fine summer's evening, knowing his wife was out? Was he afraid of something or somebody? Did somebody come during the evening, have some sort of row with Mr. Edge and go away, then Mr. Edge locked the doors so that he would not be able to creep in if he returned? Possible. Anyway, your neighbour Mrs. Merry says she sees everyone going and coming and that no one passed her window on the way to or from Hill Farm. The farm can, of course, be approached from below, across the marsh and up the fields. Anyone wanting a private and secret interview with Mr. Edge might choose that method of approach. Apparently, though Mr. Edge was not particularly

popular amongst his neighbours, forgive me, Mrs. Edge, he had no enemies. The general opinion is that he was a close man, even a morose man in some ways, but he was a straight dealer, he never did anyone a dirty trick."

"I should think not," Polly endorsed.

I said: "I think you're making too much of this locking-up business, Inspector. Just look round. There aren't any windows at the east side or the back of the house at all, none. In the front, that is in my quarters, there are two windows and the door, but you can count those right out because my quarters were always shut off from the rest of the house, locked on the Edge side and only unlocked when Mrs. Edge brought in the lamp of an evening or the woman came in to clean."

Polly said: "It was a habit to keep it locked. Eli's first wife insisted upon it when Eyvind came to live in the rooms. She said she didn't trust the German and so that door was always kept locked. We just kept on with it out of habit, I suppose."

"Thank you, Mrs. Edge," the inspector said and turned to me: "You were saying?"

"Well, counting out my quarters, there are only two windows downstairs looking out on to the farmyard. The window of the living-room, this one, with two casements that open outwards, and the window of the scullery with similar openings. The scullery window is usually open in the day-time, but I haven't often seen this window opened at all. Those geraniums along the sill make it awkward to open. And the doors—there's only the door out of the back on to the little field (and, incidentally, out to the 'little hut' as they call it), the scullery door and this door. That is only three."

"Did you lock any of the doors before you left, Mrs. Edge?"

"No," Polly said. "No, I didn't."

"Well, there we are," the inspector said; "that seems to be as far as I ever get over this door-locking business." He sighed. "Now, secondly. The pan of milk. It seems that Mr. Edge got some milk out of the dairy, poured it into a pan and put the pan on the stove. Then he lighted the gas below it and lay down on the sofa, waiting for it to come to the boil.

Apparently he meant to get himself a warm drink. That is what you think, isn't it, Mrs. Edge?"

"I can't see any other explanation," Polly murmured.

"It would seem a perfectly normal thing to do," Mr. Hope said, and his voice assumed an almost sleepy quality, "if you ever drink milk."

There was a long pause. It was a sleepy kind of day, the first really warm day of the year. There was a clucking hen just outside the door. "Tuck tuck," it went, "tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck *in*."

The inspector brought out a packet of cigarettes and offered one to Polly. She refused with a shake of her head. I took one. The inspector held his lighter for me. His hand was so deliberately steady that I looked up over the rising smoke and my eyes met his. "Aren't you having one?" I said.

"I won't smoke now," he answered.

I inhaled deeply. "That's quite right," I said at last, "Mr. Edge didn't like milk. I should think everyone within miles knew that fact. He was vociferous about it. Said he loathed the stuff and wouldn't even take it in his tea."

I looked down at the floor where Argo lay with his nose between his paws, exactly as he had always lain when Eli was sprawled on the mud-coloured sofa. Usually at least a couple of cats lay beside Eli but today there was no cat upon the sofa, even the pregnant tortoiseshell cat which was his particular favourite was missing.

I said, "But cats do."

"What?"

"Like milk. Just a minute."

I hurried over to the scullery and climbed up into the corn loft above. There was a pile of empty sacks in the corner and from it the tortoiseshell cat raised its gaunt little face to mine. There were no less than nine small creatures nuzzling away at her belly. On the floor beside her was an old and battered enamel pie-dish. Like Salome carrying the head of John the Baptist, I carried the dish down to the living-room.

"Look! This is why Eli was heating up milk."

"Why, of course!" Polly exclaimed. "Why didn't we think of that? He knows, I mean he *knew*, I hate cats and never

bother about them. Eli took up warm milk to the cat the night before he died. That is why he was heating up the milk."

Gingerly the inspector took the dish from me. He asked for a piece of newspaper and wrapped the thing up carefully. "I'll take this away and see if we can get Mr. Edge's fingerprints on it," he said.

"You will, I know," Polly nodded. She seemed relieved that an explanation had occurred.

"And now," Mr. Hope said, "let's have a look at the cat."

We all went up the ancient stair.

"Could Mr. Edge manage this stair with his sciatica and all?" the inspector asked.

"Easily. You ask Miss Clay," I said. "She's seen him shin up this stair."

I was instantly sorry I had said that. I didn't want the inspector to be asking Madge how she had come to watch Mr. Edge going up into the corn loft. I burbled on, "He could get upstairs to his bedroom, and those stairs are a good deal longer and steeper than these."

The inspector trod across the dusty floor and looked down at the tortoiseshell cat. "Well," he said at last, "the cat has had kittens all right, nobody could deny that. It was a good idea of yours, Sudley. Very good."

"Just a question of putting two and two together," I said modestly.

The inspector gave me his whole attention, which, I had noticed, he always did whenever I spoke at all. "Yes," he repeated, "I suppose it is just a question of putting two and two together."

He stood looking at me with his lips pursed and his finger and thumb pressing them together. I don't know how it was, but once again I felt that involuntary shiver which people say means someone is walking over your grave.

CHAPTER XIII

THE resumed inquest was a lengthy affair. Polly was questioned for more than an hour, and though she still wore a stunned look her evidence was clear and direct, the Coroner congratulated her, in the end, upon the straightforward way she had given her replies.

Mrs. Merry, as a contrast, gave her evidence haltingly, contradicting herself and getting flustered. Once or twice the Coroner looked at her over the top of his glasses and barked: "Speak up, please," or "I didn't quite understand; did you or did you not . . ." which caused her to cast despairing glances at Mr. Merry, who detached himself from the exhibition and looked out of the window at the tree-tops.

I was thankful that Polly had to give her testimony before I gave mine. I was dreading the thin ice over which I would have to trample, but, as far as Polly was concerned, there seemed to be no thin ice. She had returned to find the doors locked and, rather than disturb Eli, she had gone into the front living quarters and had slept on the sofa. As she said it, it sounded the most normal procedure. The Coroner seemed to find the fact that the doors were locked a great deal more interesting than Polly did. "It was not your habit to lock up every night before retiring, Mrs. Edge?" And Polly gave the answer she had given to the police, though the doors were not usually locked she had not been surprised to find them so in view of Eli's nervous state. It was, she added, possible that Eli had taken a bath in the scullery, in which case the outside door was always locked. "Did he often take a bath?" "Usually once a week, but he might quite well have taken a bath that particular evening."

"You would know, surely, whether he did or did not take a bath that particular evening, Mrs. Edge?"

Polly agreed, she would know. There was no evidence at all that Eli had taken a bath.

When my turn came I think I gave my answers as clearly

as Polly. I resolutely kept my thoughts turned from the dream stuff in the little copse and on the ordinary facts I was as certain as anyone else. I had returned to my quarters and had gone straight to bed without looking into the living-room. The first I knew about the tragedy was when Mrs. Edge came into the cowshed to tell me that she could not get into the house.

My God! I thought suddenly, what a flimsy tale! I looked round the little room, at the faces of the Merrys, the police officers, the pressmen, the coroner himself. What were they all thinking? No face wore other than a perfectly non-committal expression, but what thoughts were forming behind those faces? Had the second Mrs. Edge been the first Mrs. Edge I have no doubt at all that we would have been believed implicitly, but looking at Polly, how could anyone believe the story? Nevertheless, Polly's integrity seemed to glow out from her, no one but a boor or a dirty-minded rat could disbelieve those candid eyes and the words that fell from that sweet mouth.

The Coroner wrote in his book like a child writing in its copy-book, laboriously and with a scratchy nib. I stood silent, itching to run my fingers round the inside of my collar but resisting the impulse. At last he looked up. "Thank you," he said, "you may go back to your seat now."

The question of Argo came up. We were all asked if the dog usually lay on the hearth beside Eli and we all answered the same, yes, he was always with Eli. And the cats? Was it not a fact that Mr. Edge was very fond of cats and always lay on the sofa with one or two cats beside him? That question was more easy to answer; one cat, as we all now knew, was in the loft, two others were found dead on the sofa in the living-room.

All the usual questions about Eli's state of mind were asked. Had he any worries? None to speak of. Was he a moody and unhappy man? Not unduly. Had he any money worries? None at all. Was he worried about his health? He had painful sciatica, but that was getting better. He fussed a little over small mishaps and ailments, but nothing very much.

The question of the life insurance came out. The afternoon of Eli's death he had instructed Polly to write a cheque to the

insurance company they had interviewed. The letter containing the cheque, stamped but unposted, was produced. I am sure it made a good impression ; I wondered how it would have looked if this situation had occurred after the life insurance scheme was in operation. Not so good, I thought, not so good.

Evidence of complete and thorough examination of the gas cooker was given by a representative of the company who did his stuff very well indeed. The installation was perfect, there were no leakages, no loose connections, no ill-fitting pipes, no loose taps. The Coroner put a hypothetical case to him : suppose, he said, some fluid which might boil over were left in a pan on the gas ; could the gas be extinguished ? Grudgingly the representative admitted that *it could.*

"And if it were extinguished would the gas continue to leak out into the room ?"

Yes, the representative had to admit, yes, it *would,* but then, that might happen with any gas-stove, coal gas or any other. The Coroner looked at him with gentle reproof, his comment had not been solicited, he returned to his seat a little deflated.

Polly was recalled and the whole question of the cat's dish was gone into thoroughly. In the end Polly admitted, almost reluctantly, that she had been at a loss to understand the accident until the finding of the dish. It had not been Eli's habit to warm milk to give to the cat, or to any cats. But upon two occasions she had known him do so. He had once warmed up some milk on the old oil-stove to give to a sick cat and he did so again on the gas-cooker on the evening before he died. He was very fond of cats and he detested milk ; the natural inference was that he had heated milk for the cat.

Everyone seemed fairly satisfied at this.

I wasn't, however. Why give the cat warm milk ? Why not give it cold ? It was a warm summer's night ; what was the point in heating up the milk ? No one else seemed to think so, unless, perhaps, the Coroner, who proceeded to sum up in a low unemotional voice, almost as though he were talking to himself ; perhaps he was talking, in part, for his own benefit, hoping that by setting out the facts as dispassionately as he could he would be guided to his own conclusions.

He ended his little discourse by saying: "In order to give a verdict I must be absolutely certain in my own mind that the verdict I give is the correct one. I must have no shadow of doubt in my mind whatsoever."

There was a long pause. I was barely listening, I was quite certain, and I think everyone else was, that the verdict would be that of Death by Misadventure. But it wasn't. It was an open verdict.

I found myself standing outside in the sunshine beside Pa Merry. "What exactly does it mean?" I asked him.

"Just what he said. He thinks there is an element of doubt."

Doubt, I mused, as I cycled back to Hill Farm. What form did the Coroner's doubt take? Did he doubt the cause of death? But that had all been proved by pathologists, all were agreed upon the cause of Eli's death. Then I remembered something; was it possible that he was in some doubt as to whose hand had put the pan upon the stove? The police had been quite definite in stating that no complete set of finger-prints had been found upon the pan handle as there had upon the cat's enamel dish. The finger-prints, such as they were, had been blurred, so much so that nothing had come to light in the examination of the handle. Whose hand, then, put the pan on the gas? As the doors were found bolted from inside it could only have been Eli's hand. To my mind there was no doubt at all.

There was, of course, the vexed question as to the time of Eli's death. The experts had spoken for some time on that point and no definite conclusion was reached. There were four different opinions, all of them were definite that he had died before midnight, three of them put the time between seven and ten o'clock, but it would seem that Eli could have died any time during the five hours after Polly left the house.

During that time, of course, a great deal could have happened. Mrs. Merry said that so far as she knew no one came to the farm or left it. But then she could not be certain, there would be moments when even she did not have her nose pressed to her kitchen window, observing the comings and goings at Hill Farm.

Who would benefit by Eli Edge's death?

Myself. Heaven knows I was thankful that Eli had died. His death, in fact, would seem the only way out of my dilemma. But I did not kill him. To long for, to plan someone's death, does not make one a murderer. Or does it? Perhaps it does, but I did not, in fact, kill him.

John Merry might be glad to have Eli dead. Who knows what went on in that small turret that was John Merry's head? Only John Merry and God. But John Merry could not have done it any more than I. Both he and I were well and truly out of the way, with the girls, from seven o'clock till midnight. It was a pity, but I could not pin anything on to John Merry.

There was Eyvind the German. Ah, there I had something! Eyvind was the darkest of dark horses. He loved Polly, and, loving Polly, he might well detest Eli. Who knows what clever and subtle plan might be coming to life behind those perfect features? Eyvind knew his way about the farm, he could quite well have walked up the farm land from the bottom road, up across the fields, through hedges, and approach the house unobserved. The dog Argo was fond of Eyvind and would not bark at his arrival, he would rush out to greet him and lick his hands. The arrival of Eyvind would be no surprise to Eli, he often came, sloping in and out as though the place belonged to him. He might sit and talk with Eli for some time. But then, would he put a pan of milk on the stove and go round the house, locking and bolting all the doors inside, finally dropping down to the ground from the Edges' bedroom window and steal away across the fields, leaving Eli snoring on the sofa as he inhaled deeply the fumes from the gas-stove? Possible, possible, I thought. But not probable.

And then, I thought, where did I come in? Did Eyvind think that if Eli were to die Polly would fall into his arms and the farm into his pocket? Three months ago it might have been so, but since Eyvind had left I had come to Hill Farm. Did Eyvind really consider me to be of so little account that I could be brushed aside? That remained to be seen.

It was some time later that I learned that Eyvind had been questioned and had satisfied the police completely as to his movements. He and another youth had taken two girls to the pictures, had taken the girls home afterwards and had been

invited in for cups of tea. They had returned to their lodgings and been in bed by eléven-thirty. The German's alibi was concrete.

Then I did my own little bit of summing-up. I had really no doubt at all. It was an accident. Eli, great hefty creature, of the earth earthy, was as nervy as they make 'em. I could see him lying on the sofa watching Polly as she made her final preparations for departure, smoothing her hair in front of the looking-glass, peering into her handbag to make sure she had everything she needed, straightening her stocking, shaking out her clean handkerchief and all the time Eli would be watching her proudly with that sickening smile upon his face that so often roused me to a dull anger. Then she would kiss him lightly on the forehead and go, perhaps returning with some playful injunction.

When at last she had gone, Eli, perhaps, would sleep for a while as was his habit at that time. Then he would wake up and lie thinking about himself and his injuries. He might shake the cats off his lap and shuffle into the scullery, looking round to see how Polly had left everything. He would wonder where the tortoiseshell cat had got to, he would look out into the yard, possibly calling "Puss, puss, puss." When there was no answer he would lumber up into the corn loft above the scullery and find his beloved little cat and her enormous brood of young. "Dear me, dear me, what a hungry family you've got you, old lady!" I could almost hear him saying it. Chuckling, he would lumber down the stairs. Again his thoughts would turn inwards. Perhaps he went to the door and called for Argo and for some reason the dog did not come. Then, possibly, he locked the scullery door. Maybe he went to the other two doors and locked them. Then he went back to the sofa and lay down again. But not for long. That poor little cat! He would drag himself up with little grunts and go to find a small saucepan. The milk was kept on a shelf in the dairy; the shelf was immediately inside the door, a foot or so only from the ceiling, it had been fixed there by the enterprising Mrs. Edge many years ago so that she could reach the bread, the butter and the milk without having to negotiate the awkward dairy steps. Eli would open the dairy

door and reach for the jug of milk. He would pour a little into the pan and would go back into the living-room, pulling the door closed after him and put the pan on the stove. Then he would lie down again and wait for the milk to come to the boil. He would pick up the newspaper and after a time, perhaps, drop into a doze. The milk would boil up and over the side of the pan, the gas would go out immediately. There would be a low hissing noise but Eli would not hear it because he would be asleep. It was, indeed, doubtful if he would hear it if he were awake, it was only the slightest of noises. Presently he would pass from sleep into a coma and from a coma into death.

And he had died because he had lived long enough, because his usefulness in life was over and because a kindly God was making room for me. He was at last giving me a break, He was fixing it that I might now step into Eli's shoes and that Hill Farm would ring with the sound of the voices of our children, Polly's and mine. There would no longer be Edges at Hill Farm, but Sudleys, which was far better.

CHAPTER XIV

THE police having finished with Eli's body it was buried up in the old graveyard alongside all the other Edges. Upon the headstone, in due course, will appear the words "Eli Edge, departed this life on . . . at the age of 60." He was gathered to his fathers at a foolish age; one felt they would disapprove strongly of his premature arrival and severely reprimand the lad for his carelessness.

Polly's Mum and Dad and a great many other relations came to the funeral; I am sure they all smelled of the musty hired cars out of which they stepped. As the farmhand I did not appear. I spent the day alone, taking some sandwiches with me and doing some ditch-clearing a long way from the house, in the bottom field.

On the night after the inquest, as I prepared for bed in the room I was occupying at Cloud Farm, Ma Merry came up.

I knew she had been wanting a talk with me for several days. She always looked as though she wouldn't mind at all if I put my arms round her and kissed her, and, upon my word, quite often I very nearly did. She was a gossip and a busybody and not very intelligent, but she was so patently out for everybody's good that it was impossible not to like her. I liked her a great deal.

She sat down on the edge of my bed. "Oh, George, dear"; she wept a little. "Don't mind me, dear. It's all been so worrying, hasn't it?"

It had. I, possibly, had been a trifle more worried than she.

"We used to lead ever such a quiet life, nothing ever happened. Well, there was Mrs. Edge dying, of course, and then there was Eli marrying again. But beyond that nothing happened, until you came." She dabbed at her eyes. "Oh dear me! I wonder if I did right, going out that day and getting you to stand talking till Polly came back. I wonder if I did right?"

"You did right," I said, "because you did it for the best." Her epitaph could be—*She meant well.*

She said, "Well, it didn't come off."

"How do you mean?"

"My little plan. I thought you would cut John out with Polly."

"Very involved," I murmured.

"And so you have, dear, so you have. But it hasn't put John off. He's such a good boy is John. He's not one to fall in love easily, nor out of love easily. I ought to have known that. He takes after me." She screwed her handkerchief up into a little ball and unscrewed it again. I knew what she meant. She still loved Pa Merry and whatever he did she would continue doggedly to love him. Unfortunately the same could not be said of Pa Merry. There was a long silence; I knew she was bursting with something and guessed that she was wondering how to put it. At last it came out, but she leaned forward and put her hand on my arm, possibly so that the impact of her question would not be too great. "You and Polly love each other, don't you?"

I nodded.

"I knew it. I saw you one day, you were both walking down the lane. You"—she was stumped for words but stumbled on—"you looked like you loved each other, dear. I wished John could have seen you then. He'd have known it was all up with him."

"You don't mean to tell me John still thinks Polly——?"

She nodded. "I'm sure he does, otherwise he wouldn't go on doting on her the way he does." She was still busily screwing her handkerchief up. "He's pleased about Eli. Pleased!"

"You don't mean because he thinks now he could marry Polly?"

She nodded again.

"Well, I'm damned!" I said. "You needn't worry about that. I'm going to marry Polly. Don't make any mistake about that."

She beamed. "That's nice," she said; "you and Polly will make a lovely couple. Still, it does seem a shame to talk like that so soon after Eli's death. I'm ashamed of myself, honestly I am!" But her relief was a great deal more evident than her shame.

. . . . .

Polly herself seemed almost afraid of me; her eyes shied away from mine whenever I looked at her. She's had a nasty shock, I thought. I must let her get over it. I thought she overdid the mourning a little. Then I remembered that her father and mother were old-fashioned and, like Eli, stern Wesleyans. They would naturally be shocked if Polly's mourning were not complete. For everyday wear about the farm she bought a cheap black woollen sweater which she wore with an old skirt which she had dyed black. The skirt had shrunk in the dyeing process and fitted her closely, the jumper was like a superimposed skin. I have no doubt that the effect was unintentional but it was one that a fashionable dressmaker might have striven for in vain. In this kit every morning and evening she walked past the cowshed, carrying a bucket of food for her chickens, wearing her red clogs, and each time she left me wondering what had hit me.

It did not occur to me then, but has done so now, that

perhaps she wore the mourning religiously because she knew how well it became her.

John Merry took to popping in again several times during the day as he used to do when I first came. He took to going out in the early morning with his gun and bringing back something for the pot which his mother was expected to cook, half for the Merry family and half for Polly and, presumably, myself. We had pigeon pie cooked by Ma Merry quite often and once or twice an excellent rabbit stew made from two or three baby rabbits. I went round to the kitchen with solemn ritual for my tray just as I had done before Eli died, and each time I took the tray from Polly her eyes slid away from mine.

Polly had her meals alone.

The decorousness of our relationship was absurd and as each day passed it seemed to me to become more absurd. I told myself very often that Polly had had a shock and that things must be allowed to take their course.

To a lesser degree I, too, had had a shock. Though there was nothing I had desired more than Eli's death, I had indeed been very shocked when it actually took place. There was, however, another shock in store. I think we had all known that Eli was a man of means, that he must have saved up a good deal of money in the war years and since. If I had been asked to guess I should have put the figure at about one eighth of what he actually did leave. He left seven thousand pounds standing easy in the bank and another three hundred in bank-notes which Polly produced from inside the upright piano, wrapped up in an old sponge bag.

A musty old gentleman from the town, who was apparently the Edge family lawyer, arrived to convey this news to Polly and, whilst he was there, she told me later, she brought out the sponge bag of notes of the existence of which she had been aware ever since she came to Hill Farm.

"Eli called it Mrs. Edge's money," she said. "That's why he didn't like touching it, though he paid for the cooker and the Rover out of it. I don't know what he was saving it for." At the time of his second marriage he had made a will leaving one thousand pounds to his sister Maggie Banker of Hill Barton and the rest to his wife in trust for *any children there*

might be of the marriage. As there were no children the money became, unconditionally, Polly's. The solicitor was afraid this would cause a little heartburning amongst certain distant Edge relatives, but there it was. Eli had been penniless for long enough and he, personally, was glad to find that Eli had been able to leave such a goodly fortune. It all went to show, he said, that if you looked after the pennies the pounds would look after themselves—an adage the veracity of which I have never been able to acknowledge.

Seven thousand pounds, and the farm!

Some of that money, of course, had belonged to the horse-coper whose daughter had been the first Mrs. Edge, but the rest of it Eli had earned through diligent hard work. He and the first Mrs. Edge must have toiled ceaselessly for many years rearing the cockerels that he could sell for such a fine price in the black market, feeding the poultry on the best of food so that they would produce eggs for which he could get six shillings per dozen and selling bushels of corn illegally. If he had kept pigs I daresay he could have left twice what he did leave, but that would have meant employing extra labour and Eli had, for most of the rich years, worked alone.

I felt a wave of irritation with Inspector Hope. Why could he not spend his time nosing out the culprits on the black market, who flourished exceedingly, who grew thick upon the ground round his feet, instead of wasting his time investigating a death which was patently an accident?

I spent the whole of one milking amusing myself forming a neat phrase which I would fire off next time I saw Inspector Hope. I would say something like: "I suppose you people think you have stamped out the black market? Let me tell you, my dear Inspector, you haven't." Or: "The black market is the Underground Movement in this county, Inspector. I'm not yet a member of the Maquis, but any time now . . ." Something like that. I waxed almost indignant, enjoying myself in the role of Good Citizen. Here you had the police footling around investigating car crashes, peering at people's licences, enquiring into accidents whilst the whole countryside was a seething inferno of crooks making money hand over fist, filling the bellies of rich folk who could afford to pay six

shillings a dozen for their eggs and forty shillings each for their roast fowl! It wasn't good enough. . . .

A shadow fell across my milking pail.

I looked up.

It was my dear old friend Inspector Hope.

. . . . . .

I remember murmuring, "They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead!" Irrelevant, of course, and rather silly. Inspector Hope looked singularly alive; though it was yet another perfect day, he was wearing his raincoat, hanging loose and unbuttoned.

"Pardon?"

"Like the poor," I said, "you are always with us"; it seems that I was determined to annoy.

But Inspector Hope is never annoyed, he has deep philosophical wells into which he is able to dip for refreshment when things become too much for him.

"I can't keep away," he said with a smile that was almost deprecatory.

I went on squirting milk into the pail, my head pressed against the warm side of the cow. What the hell has he come for? All my remarks about black market activities were wiped from my mind. I was worried. There was a very long pause; the inspector stood beside me as though he had nothing else in the world to do; he stood with the ease and detachment he might have shown whilst watching men fishing at the end of Brighton Pier.

I finished milking the cow, gave it a slap upon its revolting rump and watched it teeter out into the sunshine.

"Aren't we going to be left in peace now?" I said.

"Peace?" the inspector repeated as though he had never heard of it.

"We've all had a shock, you know. We want a bit of time to ourselves to recover. It makes you uneasy with the police always popping in."

"Does it?" the inspector said, surprised.

"Well, of course. Aren't you satisfied with the Coroner's findings?"

"Of course we aren't satisfied. If we had all been satisfied there wouldn't have been an open verdict. All that locking-up, for one thing, makes you think. However . . ." The inspector fell into a thoughtful silence.

I was pretty sure of myself, I remember. I knew that I had not killed Eli Edge, I could afford to behave any way I liked; annoyed, indignant, I was on the level.

I said: "Well, do tell me what you have come for this morning. Some eggs, perhaps?" There was a good deal of temper at the back of the remark, of course, but the inspector, once again, took it blandly.

"I came to give you this," he said. He took out his shabby note-case and extracted therefrom a grubby scrap of folded paper. He unfolded it and held it out. I stared at it, not taking it from his hand, as though it were something unclean, which, indeed, it was. Upon the slip of paper was written, not very legibly: H.M. IS GRACIOUSLY PLEASED TO GRANT TO DEREK ANNESLEY ST. GEORGE SUDLEY HIS ROYAL LICENCE TO BE AT LARGE.

CHAPTER XV

I THINK it must be fairly clear by now that this story of mine is a record of gradual self-destruction. On that day, not so very long ago, when I stepped lightly and happily along the road from the prison, my destination Waterloo, I was beginning a new life, and this time I did not intend to make any mistakes. But it seems that once again I started off on the wrong foot; once again, indeed with maddening regularity, I had relaxed my attempts at self-discipline and behaved any old how.

This particular piece of folly, I remembered now, was upon the occasion when I had shaken the dust of Hill Farm from my feet, when I had walked out in the firm belief that it was for good, but knowing in the mysterious region known as my "heart of hearts" that it was not so. In a gesture that was defiant, dramatic or merely stupid, I had left my ticket-of-

leave hanging from the chimney-piece in my little living-room, held in place by a piece of Goss china.

Eyvind had spent the night in my quarters, he had studied the paper with great interest, I have no doubt, and had understood its significance. He had copied it out word for word and he had either put it away for future use or taken it then and there to the police station. I suspect that he had kept it by him until such time as he thought it might be useful, for, in the ordinary way, the information would not be of much interest. The opportunity for using this information had not been long in turning up. It was a good bit of staff-work on the German's part. I would not have thought him capable of the subtlety. Perhaps it was his love for Polly that rendered him, temporarily, as wily as the fox!

It was damned unpleasant and might have been extremely awkward but for the truth which sang continually through my brain like a theme song: thanks be to God, I had nothing whatever to do with Eli Edge's death. So I had nothing to fear. In fact, if not in thought, I was as innocent as Mr. Hope himself.

And I smiled as blandly as Mr. Hope himself. "Well, thanks! It was a silly thing to leave lying around, wasn't it? People might get ideas about me. Makes you think, doesn't it?"

"It's made me think a good deal."

"It doesn't matter how much you think," I said; "you can't make white black."

"No," Mr. Hope agreed; "nor, alas, can I make black white."

. . . . .

When I went to the scullery door for my tray there was no meal ready.

Polly was sitting on a stool beside the shallow, old-fashioned sink. I thought she was washing her hair or something, she was resting her forehead against the edge and strands of her hair were trailing in the sink. She looked defeated.

She raised her head when I put my hand on her shoulder.

Her face was cream-coloured and damp. "Oh, George" —she snatched for my hand and held it against her face—"I feel so awful——"

"Awful?"

"—awfully sick."

"Sick? Is that all?" I said with relief.

"No, that isn't all," she murmured. "I think I'm going to have a child."

A child!

I cannot help reflecting, now, how odd one is. One does that which causes a child, and when a child actually results one is temporarily stunned with astonishment.

A child!

But was the child Eli's, or mine?

I was unable to ask Polly; if the child were Eli's I knew that I couldn't take it.

Something of this must have shown in my face for Polly shrank back in terror. "George!" she cried.

I turned from her clumsily, dragging away my hand, and went out across the farmyard, through the gate and up the slope towards the little copse. I turned into the copse and lay down on the ground with my face pressed to the good earth.

. . . . .

Eli's or mine?

If I could have died quietly below the silver birches in the little copse I would have done so. I suppose I have always been unlucky and I felt instinctively that the answer would not be the right one for me. I wanted to die so that I should not have to face up to it.

After a while I raised my head to watch the activities of an ant who was endeavouring to carry something as large again as himself. He tried pulling it, but that was not satisfactory, he ran round to the back and pushed it; that wasn't too good either. He went on a voyage of inspection over the top of the object, turning to right and to left, having a thoroughly good look. Then he climbed down and turned the object right over, thus giving himself a better hold. He

pulled it one millimetre and pushed it another, alternately. After about an hour he had managed to get it on to a wide grass blade and started the steep ascent with unabated vigour. What was it, I wondered, upon which he thought it worth while expending so much energy, and where did he think he was taking it? In another half-hour both the ant and I knew where he was taking his load—up to the end of the grass blade, where it toppled over and fell to the ground. The ant looked down at it over the edge, then he hurried down the slope and searched frantically for it, with every appearance of rising panic.

I don't know whether he found his treasure or not. I saw Polly come out of the living-room door and walk to the corner of the house where she stood looking down the green towards the gate. Then she came back to the scullery door and looked up the slope towards the copse, shading her eyes with her hands. She went inside and came out almost at once wearing her red clogs. I knew she was coming to look for me. I stayed where I was, sullenly watching her approach. She was panting a little when she reached me.

"I'm better now," she said. "I feel better when I have had something to eat."

I said nothing; I looked away, waiting.

She put a hand on my side. "Aren't you pleased, George?" she said gently.

She sounded like the perfect little wife.

My heart gave a great leap, it certainly seemed as though the answer was going to be the right one for me, but I stayed sullen and kept looking away. I said harshly, "Whose child is it, Eli's or mine?"

She was silent for so long that I turned to look at her. Her face was buried in her hands. I pulled them away. "Tell me, Polly."

"How can you be so cruel?"

"But you loved Eli; you've often said so."

"Only in a way. I was fond of him."

"Even after you came to my room the first time, you petted him and teased him. And you both planned to go off in the Land Rover to see your parents."

She looked exasperated. "You don't seem to understand anything about the way I love you," she said. "I couldn't ever let Eli touch me in that way, after you. That's where I'm different from you. You say you love me, and I think you do, but it doesn't stop you going off and having a good time with other girls."

It was my turn to be surprised and exasperated. Polly went on: "In some ways, George, you're shallow and superficial. You can laugh things off in a way I never could."

"I am shallow," I agreed. "I'm like a creeping surface plant, with no roots. When you have no roots, perhaps, you don't feel things the way you would if you had roots deep into the good earth."

I fell silent, impressed by my discovery. I had never had the thought before; that, perhaps, is what has always been wrong with me.

Polly gave a little moan and leaned against me, her head on my shoulder. "I never loved anyone in my life like I love you. Other girls I knew used to 'fall in love', be crazy about a man, but I never did. I used to think some day I would. That is why I liked men falling in love with me. I used to think, 'This time I'll feel *it*,' and I never did. Then I thought that perhaps I was the sort who never would. And so I married Eli. And even after that I thought perhaps I had missed something, and so I was pleased when John Merry loved me, and Eyvind and others; I still thought that maybe I'd feel the same way about them. But then you came along, George. As soon as I saw you I knew there was something different about the way I felt. And then I got frightened and I really wanted you to go."

"When you knew about me?"

"No, not just that. I was frightened by my own feelings. I'd been just sort of middling happy before you came, and after you came I used to get miserable and then, when you made love to me, I was so happy that it hurt. Sometimes I think I'd rather be back again, joggling along, middling happy."

"No," I said, "if you muddle along in a swamp of misery most of your life and get an occasional reprieve to walk in

happiness amongst the stars it's better than staying middling happy all your life."

"I wonder . . ." Polly said.

But I didn't wonder, I knew it.

. . . . .

The cows started to shout about it being milking-time, but we didn't care; we lay there in the little copse, mouth to mouth, heart to heart, and talked about our child.

At last Argo, who had been sniffing uneasily about the farm, found us, and bounded about round us and over us in such a transport of delight that we might have been away for weeks.

"Poor old Eli," I said, looking down at his farm on that lovely summer's evening, "but perhaps it was better that he died when he did. It would have broken him up if you'd left him, Polly."

"Yes. And where would we have gone?"

"I daresay we should have done all right. I'd have got another job and we'd have taken rooms somewhere."

Polly shivered. "It does seem as though Eli's dying like that was meant, somehow, doesn't it?"

"Yes, my Polly. It does."

"George—" a long pause— "I shall have to say this is Eli's baby."

I thought carefully. It had been conceived some time during the four weeks preceding Eli's death; therefore, as far as anyone knew, it was Eli's child. The child of his old age, the child for which he had longed. And it would be born posthumously.

"It will have to be called Edge, which is a pity, in a way, but at least we owe it to Eli. There will be an Edge to take over Hill Farm, if it is a boy. And," I said, "the next children won't be Edges, they will be Sudleys."

"We can't marry until after the baby is born."

I agreed. "But the present arrangement isn't bad," I said. "I can go on sleeping at Cloud and you can have the little Tiffin up here for company until after the baby is born, that seems to satisfy everyone. You'd better put it out straight away

that you are going to have a child. Start off by telling Ma Merry. Tell her what a shame it is that Eli died before he knew. That you didn't tell him because you weren't quite sure——"

"No, no, no!" Polly protested. "I can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"I must wait a little while. I can't go about yet saying that I'm going to have a baby. I haven't even been to the doctor to confirm it."

"Perhaps it is rather soon," I said.

"Besides," Polly said vaguely, "it isn't right, with me still in mourning and all that."

"Just as you like, but they'll all have to know sooner or later."

"Later will do. When it's obvious the news will tell itself; I won't have to go shouting it about. People will take it for granted that it is Eli's child."

I wonder if she's right, I remember thinking a little ruefully.

Hand in hand we strolled back down the slope and through the wattle gate into the farmyard, and as we walked towards the scullery door there appeared round the corner of the house a vision clad in white samite, mystic, wonderful. It was Madge Clay. I don't know whether she considered a cream linen tailored suit the thing for a post-funeral visit, but she certainly had made an all-out sartorial effort, and the effect was smashing. Her lipstick was the gaudiest yet, and I think she must have been doing something to her eyes, they were what an enterprising journalist recently called "beautifully edited".

She certainly had some scheme afoot. I cannot pretend to have any idea what it was, I never do know what women are up to; she behaved like the duchess arriving at a charity matinée, sweet and gracious and quite madly interested in the poor Poor.

I didn't like it, I felt distinctly uneasy. But short of taking her by her perfectly tailored shoulders and hustling her off down the green I did not know what I could do about it.

"Poor Mrs. Edge, what a time you have had! How very much you are going to miss Mr. Edge. Indeed, I'm going to

miss him, so what it must be like for you I can only imagine, you poor little thing." And so on and so forth. And presently: "What are you going to do now, Mrs. Edge? Will you be going back to your parents?"

Polly said that it was really much too soon for her to have made any plans for the future, and Madge said she supposed so, but in the meanwhile it must be a great comfort to her to have "Mr. Sudley" for company. There was something a little scornful about the way she said "Mr. Sudley". I shuffled uneasily.

"Poor Mr. Edge," Madge said. "Only the other day he was so kind about the corn. I can see him now, carrying out the sack for me, beaming the way he did when he and I were up to something!" She sighed again and said that she certainly was going to miss him. "People oughtn't to die in the early summer," she said, looking round her. Wasn't it a heavenly day? She had woken up early that morning and looked out of her window and there had been a whole family of baby bunnies playing on her lawn. She had shot three of them.

"What! From your bedroom window!" I exclaimed. And Madge said yes, from her bedroom window; was I surprised? There was still quite a lot going on at The Flagpole that I did not know about. I was annoyed at that; it sounded as though I were a frequent visitor to her house, and that, I now reflect, is just the way she intended it to sound.

One of the bunnies, she rattled on, was now stewing for supper and the other two she had brought over for us. Anything for the pot was welcome now, wasn't it? She knew Mr. Edge had been a remarkably good shot and had kept them well supplied with food in the winter; could Mrs. Edge shoot?

Of course, Polly said with a polite casualness I admired; had one ever heard of a farmer's wife who couldn't shoot? Little liar, I thought with a chuckle, but I managed to wipe off my grin before either of them saw it.

There was an uncomfortable silence which Madge broke by saying, "Well, I won't stay"—not that we had asked her to. "Will you come down to the car for the bag, George?" She threw me a look of the most velvety.

With some dignity Polly thanked her for coming before she turned away and went into the house, and I went down the green with Madge.

"What the hell did you come for?"

"Why shouldn't I come? I often came to Hill Farm before your arrival, my dear George."

"Why on earth are you all decked out like this? I've never seen you in anything but slacks."

"That doesn't mean I haven't any other clothes," she snapped. "As a matter of fact I am on my way to a cocktail party."

"In Lambing or in Cloud?" I asked sarcastically. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Ma Merry bobbing about in the window of her house.

"Neither; over at Potter St. Mary." She lifted the taut canvas cover of the back seat and brought out the brace of young rabbits. I took them and held them dangling from my finger, looking at their glassy eyes and their fluffy cottontails.

"The party is given by Major Graham, the Duke of Retford's agent."

She leaned back, looking very effective against the dark green enamelwork of her car, and faced me.

"You're not still going on about that job, are you?" I said.

"I think the job is still going, if you will take it. Major Graham would do anything for me; he knows I badly want you to get the job."

I kept on looking at the rabbits, but somehow I saw her face as I said, "I must stay here now, of course." She still wore her wide smile but everything had gone from behind it.

"It's your own good I'm thinking of, George."

"How could it be? You know I am perfectly happy here."

"Are you going to marry Polly?"

"Yes."

She opened the car door and got into the driving-seat. She had not got her dog with her; she looked a little forlorn sitting there, in her finery, with the empty seat beside her.

"I'm sorry, Madge," I said. "You're a good sort."

"I'd make you a better wife than Polly. You would be happy with me."

"I will be happy with Polly," I said.

She did not say she hoped so, she simply put the gear in and drove off with a whoop from the exhaust, without another word.

. . . . .

I suppose I wasn't in any hurry to move off; I went on gaping down at the dead rabbits, thinking what a damn' shame it all was, when a slight cough gave me quite a start. Pa Merry was leaning over the fence a few yards up the lane, he looked as though he had been there for some time. He had coughed to attract my attention and now, as he appeared to be about to say something, I moved nearer. He was dressed in his incongruous black jacket and striped trousers and was smoking a short cigar.

"You're the devil of a fellow, Sudley," he reflected as I came up to him. "One of these days someone will blow out your brains."

"That's an odd thing to say."

"*In vino veritas*," Pa Merry murmured, which I took to mean that he had had his evening *apéritif*. "You've got all the women on a string, eh?"

"Two dead rabbits on a string," I think I answered, foolishly.

"Why don't you gerrout er here?"

"What?"

"I said," Pa Merry eyed me a trifle pugnaciously, "I said, why don't you go?"

"Why should I?"

"We've had nothing but trouble since you came." He looked about him, waving an arm vaguely. "You couldn't find a more peaceful spot anywhere than this little lane. It did you good to come back to it of an evening after all the—the toil and moil of the town. It did you good to come back here and —rusticate. But since you came, upon my fanny, it's been a pleasure to get back to work. There's no peace any more. The—the women are all of a doodah."

It was a struggle not to laugh. He looked a tall, comic chap, leaning there over the gate in the cool of the evening,

trying to get to grips with the situation, the cocktail inside him giving him a spurious philosophy and a flow of words which he would regret later on.

"Come on down to the Red Letter," I said, "and let's talk it over."

"Oh no, dear me no; I'm not going to—fraternize with the enemy. Tell me, Sudley, how is it done?"

"I might tell you if I knew what you were talking about."

He waved this aside. "You know all right. Well, I can't say I didn't warn Eli. 'What the devil do you want to keep that fellow Sudley for?' I said." Pa Merry sighed heavily. "He was a stubborn chap, was Eli. I reckon if I hadn't said anything he might have got rid of you, but no, he wanted to prove himself right. But he was dead uneasy, right from the start. That slipping up with the milk and that stupid accident with the Land Rover—all nerves; he was scared stiff of you, and that's a fact."

"You simply don't know what you're saying."

"Oh, I know all right. Eli was scared stiff Polly would fall for you."

"You've got the whole situation wrong," I said; "you're wrong all along the line. And the quicker you rid yourself of those ideas the better. It's dangerous, talking like that; it doesn't do anyone any good and it might do a lot of harm."

"I'm backing myself up. I've told you to go, and I'm giving you my reasons why."

"You've told me to go," I reflected aloud, "and if it was any business of yours I might listen. As it is——"

Pa Merry banged his fist into the palm of his hand. "I'm sick of seeing all the damned women"—he paused for the word—"bemused! That's it—*bemused*."

"Whatever it is you're sick of seeing," I snapped, "you'll have to get used to it. I'm here for good. I'll be marrying Polly later on."

Pa Merry groaned. "Then I'll sell up the damn' farm," he said. "Honestly, Sudley, I can't stand you."

"That's certainly honest," I said. "I know where I am, then. Eli didn't like me, John doesn't like me, Eyvind doesn't like me. Who else is there?"

"There's all the blasted womenfolk. They dote on you."

This conversation did not seem to be getting us anywhere. I sloped off towards the gate of Hill Farm, but he called me back.

"Hi!" Reluctantly I returned. "When are you marrying Polly, then? You'd best let Eli cool off or you'll have the whole countryside talking."

I said, "Eli's heir will have to get itself born first."

He didn't take that in at first and when it did reach home his face fell wide open. "Say that again."

I said it again and added: "So you see, Polly has to have someone to run the farm for her. She's not fit at the moment to take on a new hand and show him all the ropes. Even if you don't like me, Mr. Merry, I like you. We'll have to get along as neighbours."

But he wasn't listening, he was gobbling, like a turkey strangling itself over a too large morsel of food.

I watched him with growing dislike.

"Eli's child, did you say? Ho, ho, ho! That's rich, that is!" He turned away from the fence and rolled back to the house roaring with laughter. "Ho, ho, ho!"

CHAPTER XVI

"WHERE have you been?" Polly asked.

"Speaking with the enemy at the gate," I replied, throwing the rabbits down on the table. I could see at once that she was again upset about something. I cursed women and their moods.

That was the last chance I had to save myself. I could, indeed I should, have left then.

Yet when I looked at Polly my bones were turned to water, I could no more have left her then than I could have severed one of my own limbs.

She thought, of course, that I had spent nearly half an hour talking to Madge Clay. Was it to be always thus? Would every woman who came near us cause Polly to react thus? If so, it was quite evident that life was going to be completely

unendurable. Could not a glance in a looking-glass tell Polly that there was no other woman to touch her? Or was it only where I was concerned that Polly was jealous? I felt a sick despair; why should the real Polly, the Polly I knew in moments of intimacy, be marred by this termagant?

"Look," I said angrily, "pay attention to this, Polly. I've been talking to Pa Merry. He's an unfriendly sort of bloke. He as good as told me to get out."

"What on earth has it got to do with him?" Polly exclaimed, surprised out of her mood.

"That's what I told him. But the point is I had to tell him I couldn't leave now because you were going to have Eli's child."

"You did? Well, I suppose everyone will know sooner or later."

"The point is . . ." I hesitated and then changed my mind. Why tell her that no one was going to believe the child to be Eli's?—"nothing," I concluded.

The gas-cooker was brought back and put into its old place in the living-room. I came in as the local carrier and his man were leaving, bearing on their shoulders the mud-coloured moquette sofa. I stepped aside and watched them carry it through the door and out. Polly was standing by the living-room window, she watched them carry it through the little gate in the fence, along the side of the farmyard and round the corner of the house. Then she turned to me: "You see, we've got the cooker back, George. Will you fix it up for me?"

"Sure," I said, "I'll do it now," and went off for a spanner.

When I returned Polly was pushing a large armchair from the centre of the room into the space where the sofa had stood. I helped her. She did not tell me whether she was sending it to an auction room or whether she was giving it to the carrier, she said nothing then or at any other time about the sofa.

The next day the carrier returned. I was going into the cowshed, but, seeing him with his mate, and the van propped open at the gate, I left the door of the shed open in order that I might see what was going on. There was a certain amount of shouting and grunting and presently the two of them staggered past with a large piece of wood which I was

unable to identify. Several other pieces followed, and it was only when I saw the great rectangular spring mattress that I realized what was going—the big four-poster bed! I had a pailful of milk ready to pour over the cooler but for the life of me I could not go out into the open and meet ignominiously a large fragment of that majestic giant. I lurked in the shed until I heard, "Is that all then, Mrs. Edge?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Huff."

"Good day then, missus."

"Oh, Mr. Huff, just a minute . . ."

"What's all this lot?"

"The curtains. You know, the pink curtains that go all round the top, and four long ones that hang down the sides."

"You won't get much for them. Reckon you'd best keep them for rags."

"No, please take them, Mr. Huff. Keep them yourself, if you think they'd be useful. But take them away. I don't want them any more."

"Very well. As you say, missus."

I waited until he was well away and then went out with my pail. Inspector Hope was approaching up the green. I poured the milk over the cooler.

"Good morning, Sudley," the inspector said. "I called to make sure they'd sent the cooker back in good order."

He stood looking at me so quizzically that I almost laughed. I could see his thoughts, they were: "Popping the bed?"

I said, "Come inside and see for yourself."

He stood looking at the shining villain, so innocent in its white and chromium guise. "You've fixed it up again then. You're quite a handyman, Sudley, I see."

"Yes," I grinned deprecatingly, "I'm pretty useful with my fingers at times."

"Um." The inspector pursed his lips and pressed them together with two fingers. "I trust you'll take care with this stove, Mrs. Edge."

"I will indeed," Polly murmured.

Then he turned right round and looked thoughtfully at the space where the mud-coloured sofa had stood. "Um," he said again, nothing more.

The sun streamed in through the row of geraniums on the sill on to the red-tiled floor, outside a hen pecked about round the flagstones of the path. "Tuck, tuck, tuck . . ."

We all three stood in absolute silence whilst the inspector looked around him as though he had never seen the room before; he turned his head this way and that in the jerky, inquisitive way of the hen outside. "Tuck, tuck, tuck," went the hen; "tuck, tuck, tuck . . ."

"Makes you wonder," the inspector said at last, as though to himself; "makes you wonder."

"Look," Polly said, there was an edge of exasperation to her voice, "I must get on——"

"Of course, of course, Mrs. Edge. I won't keep you from your chores. Well, I'm glad to see the stove has been returned all in good order. I'll be off."

But he was in no hurry to move off. Polly left the room, sweeping aside the prickly curtain and running up the stairs with quick, exasperated footsteps. Stay not upon the order of your going—I thought. But still he hung around.

"Beats me how that dog got out," he said at last. "I wish I knew that, for interest, y'know, just for the interest of the thing. How does a dog go through a bolted door? Four doors, all bolted with big rusty old-fashioned bolts. And yet the dog gets out. Makes you think."

"You seem convinced the dog was in the room with Mr. Edge. I don't know why you should be so sure."

"I don't know why either, but I am."

"Wasn't it made clear that the dog was outside when Mrs. Edge left?"

But it had not been made clear. Neither Polly nor I could remember exactly where Argo had been when we left the house.

"If that dog had been outside when Mrs. Edge left, and I don't say he wasn't, then old Edge got up and let him in."

Yes, I agreed there with the inspector. Eli liked company, he didn't mind much whether it was people or animals, there was always some live creature with him. I, too, began to wonder how Argo had got out.

"If he'd got up to let the dog out he might have bolted

the door before lying down again," I suggested, unconvincing and unconvinced.

"Not he," Inspector Hope declared. "Here, what is all this about Mr. Edge locking himself in like a frightened old lady? Everyone tosses off the idea lightly. But let me tell you, Sudley, *I* don't. Sixty years Edge has lived at Hill Farm, the place lying wide open all day, all those years. You don't suddenly start bolting yourself in at seven o'clock of a summer's evening. Nay—the things people'll swallow!"

"Unless he was afraid of someone or something."

"Tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck," the hen outside suggested.

"And there was a lot of money in the piano," I added.

I had been endeavouring, during this conversation, to speed the parting, edging towards the door. Now I actually stepped over the threshold; the inspector could hardly stay alone in the middle of the living-room darting his glances around him; he followed me, albeit reluctantly. Like a host seeing off a guest I strolled round the corner of the house with him. Down by the gate his small car was waiting; I could see the back of the neck of the stodgy sergeant as he waited at the wheel. But still the man was reluctant to go. He wandered off the path and stared down into the water in the old bath.

"Still at it," he murmured. "What energy."

He meant, I supposed, the little U-shaped larvae, turning themselves inside out and back again sixty times a minute. "Pretty, pretty, and so evil," he mused; "it's delight that makes them like that. They're writhing with pleasure at the thought of what they're going to do."

"You mean, when they are finally mosquitos?"

"Um." Idiotically we both stared down into the bath.

Then somewhere in the little copse a cuckoo called.

"A beautiful day," Inspector Hope remarked; "beautiful indeed."

I said: "If Mr. Edge was busying himself with the tortoise-shell cat and her kittens he wouldn't be bothering with the dog Argo. Argo probably went out when Mrs. Edge went out, and stayed out, mouching about the farm."

"Ever tried shutting that dog out?" Mr. Hope asked. "In

a couple of minutes there he is outside the door asking to be let in. Making noises like a bagpipes starting up. He is more of a lapdog than a farm animal."

He was right. When Argo was shut out he always started up a tune on his nose-organ. Many a time I have seen Eli lumber to his feet and open the door for Argo.

"But the dog didn't want to be gassed," Mr. Hope told me. "His instinct told him something was wrong. He wanted to be out. And he got himself out, the same way whoever turned that gas tap on got out." Then he quickly corrected himself to, "*Might* have got out."

He went away down the green. I watched him get into the car and drive off.

Polly had come down to the living-room, she was fidgeting round the room, touching things here and there.

"Oh, George, what have you been talking to him about all this time?"

"Nothing much. What's wrong, Polly darling?"

"Oh, George . . ." She ran to me and buried her face against my shirt, she was trembling. "I'm so frightened, so frightened!"

"For the love of Mike, what of?"

"I'm frightened for you. Supposing he finds out about you."

"About me? Oh, I see what you mean. My darling little thing—he knows."

"Knows!"

"Of course he knows."

"But how?"

"They keep a check on ex-gaolbirds, you know, Polly. But in my case, as it happens, it was your boy-friend Eyvind who enlightened them."

"Eyvind!"

"You remember that time I walked out on you for good an' all?"

She nodded.

"I left my ticket-of-leave hanging from the chimney-piece."

"You fool!"

I inclined my head in agreement. "Not the most foolish

thing I have done in my lifetime by any means. But very, very foolish."

"So he took it to the police! He hates you, George."

"So I gather," I said dryly.

"So that is why the inspector and the sergeant keep on coming! But George"—she shook my arm—"this is terrible!"

"No, Polly. Not terrible. They've got nothing against me. I committed robbery with violence once; I paid the penalty in full. That's all there is to it."

"But they think you—you——"

"Killed Eli by the ingenious method of causing the pan of milk to boil over?"

She nodded.

"Come off it, Polly. Even if he thinks so he can't make it so."

Polly still clutched at my arm. "But they won't leave it at that, George."

"They'll have to. Heaven knows they have to leave real murderers alone because of lack of evidence. They can't pin anything on to me, fortunately. I've a perfectly good alibi. And even if I hadn't——" I changed my tone and wrapped Polly in my arms. "I ain't done it, and I ain't had anything to do with it, and that's the best alibi in the world." I kissed the top of her shining head.

But still she was not happy.

"You see . . ."

"Yes, what?"

"You came back."

"When?"

"That evening."

Yes, I came back. I turned back when I was on the way to Potter St. Mary. I came back for my note-case. I had completely forgotten that tiny fact. I came back, and on my way I was passed by John Merry with his party in his M.G.

"So I did!" I said. "So I was the last here after all! Why didn't you remind me of that, Polly? I had completely forgotten, as it happens."

Polly's face was still hidden against my breast. She made a muffled sound.

"Polly," I shook her slightly, "why didn't you remind me? Why didn't you mention it? Why didn't you say something when the inspector was asking us all for every detail of what we did?"

"I forgot, too."

"You didn't, Polly. If you had forgotten then, you would have forgotten it still. You remembered it so much that you were probably thinking of nothing else. You didn't tell the police because you thought—my God!—you thought it might get me into trouble. You thought, in fact you still think, I arranged the gas-cooker so that Eli was killed!"

Polly pressed her face harder against my breast. "I don't care, I don't care. I don't care what you've done. Don't talk about it."

I was deeply shocked. I pushed Polly away and sat down and stared at her, sweating. I could not begin to understand. I had to struggle to accept without understanding. The girl whom I had thought would be shocked out of loving me by the information that I had been in gaol serving a sentence for robbery with violence was now calmly (no, not indeed, very calmly!) accepting the supposition that I had caused Eli to die!

But wait a minute!

If I could have caused Eli to die I would. Who was I, if innocent of his murder, to be shocked? In theory I was Eli's killer a dozen times over.

Murderers, I now reflect, are not what they were.

> That night he lay in agony,
> In silence vast and deep,
> With fevered eyes like burning glass
> He stared aghast at sleep.
> For sin had rendered unto him
> The keys of hell to keep.

No Eugene Aram I.

But an attenuated, sneaking taker of life.

And yet Polly loved me. Therein, I thought, lies my salvation.

. . . .

She was shaking from head to foot. I took her on my knee and rocked her like a child, murmuring endearments into her hair. "Polly, my life, my little heart . . ." But still she went on shivering.

Eli had what he called his medicine chest, a white painted cupboard in the scullery in which he kept a variety of medicines more suitable for removing varnish than for human consumption. They were not, indeed, intended primarily for human consumption, but were a variety of prescriptions which, over the years, had been dispensed by the local vet for Eli's working horses, his dogs and his cats; there was even a bottle of evil-looking black fluid with a label on which was written "For The Old Black Hen". After a bit of fiddling about I found the brandy bottle, poured out about half a teacupful and took it in to Polly. There was not a vestige of colour in her face and her forehead was damp with a sickly sweat. I made her drink the brandy, though she coughed and spluttered over it like a kitten, then she lay back with her eyes shut.

"My God!" I kept on exclaiming to myself. "My God! She thinks I did in Eli!"

This is beyond everything, I thought, stamping about the room. For the first time in my life I've settled down. I'm working as hard or harder than I have ever worked before. I'm holding down a job of work, and what is more I want to hold it down. I've found my feet. There's a scrap of future ahead of me. I'm where I want to be. I'm content.

And this is what happens!

She thinks I planned Eli's death.

It was a quibble, of course. It would seem I had forgotten many things. It seems that only now, when I am writing everything down dispassionately, do I remember the occasion of Eli's accident when the Rover was smashed up and we were all talking it over in the Merrys' kitchen. "What did you do, George?" Polly had said, and she had looked at me directly, her white brow furrowed. "What did you *do*?" I remembered, too, that evening, not so very long before Eli died, when I had ranged the house looking into the coffer, the dairy, down the well, trying to visualize some sort of "natural" death for the master of the house.

I was full of righteous indignation. I had not killed Eli and yet Polly thought I had. Maybe Inspector Hope thought so too; I could get over that. But I could not get over Polly thinking it.

With her eyes still shut Polly said: "Whatever you have done, George, I shall always love you. I can't help it."

"Well, Polly, it was a sorry day for you when Mrs. Merry kept me talking at the gate until you came back from the village."

"Don't talk silly."

"You think it's been worth it, do you?" I asked violently.

She stirred restlessly. "Maybe if you didn't smile the way you do——"

"Smile!" I shouted. "To hell with that schoolgirl nonsense. You damned women are all alike. You're as glad of a roll in the hay as all the rest of 'em, and yet you like to hang it about with pretty baubles and make the thing look like a sickly Valentine card. Do you know what you were shouting at me that morning in the sunshine down the green? Well, I'll tell you. You were shouting, 'I want you like hell; I want to go to bed with you and the sooner the better!' And so I stayed. I played ball. I gave up 'mayhem for mimsey'——" I paused for breath.

The cat rose from the hearthrug with great dignity, gave me a look and stalked from the room.

"—and now," I went on, "when the Lord has removed Eli, painlessly and completely, now, when there's happiness in front of us, you have to start this sort of thing."

Her very immobility wore me down. It is no fun ranting to an effigy, my fine rage fell away from me like a splendid purple cloak, and left me naked and shivering.

"I've a filthy temper," I muttered.

In a still small voice Polly said: "You see, George, you *have* been in gaol, there's no getting away from that. Robbery with violence."

"From which you naturally get the idea that I am a habitual burglar. I should have told you all about it."

"I don't want to know."

"You're going to know. I'm going to tell you now. Ever

heard of football pools?" But it was no good starting my confession in that sarcastic frame of mind. I went off to the scullery to give myself a cupful of horse brandy.

And nearly fell over a bundle of rags on the floor between myself and Eli's medicine chest.

It was the crone who swabbed the scullery floor from time to time.

"What are you doing?"

She sat back on her heels and looked up at me, leering slightly. "Scrubbin'," which, of course, was evident. "Didn't you 'ear me come?"

I didn't reply; I got the bottle out of the cupboard and took it into the living-room, taking care to shut the door between the living-room and the scullery which had been slightly ajar.

"Do you know what I did for a living after I came out of the Army, Polly?" I poured out a good half-cup of horse brandy for myself and took a long pull at it. The falling-away of my rage had given me a cold, unprotected feeling which the brandy began to repair. "I acted as guide, courier, if you like, to rich Americans coming over to have a look at post-war London. I fixed up rooms for them, took furnished flats, engaged servants for them, showed them all the ropes, hired Daimlers to take them round England and went with them, pointing out cathedrals as we flashed through the ancient towns, paying their hotel bills. Dogsbody, in fact. A hell of a job. It was all right to begin with, there were magnates galore with their families; I quite enjoyed it. But later on the magnates seemed to drop out and I was left with magnates' wives and widows. There were any amount of them; when one of them left England to return to the States she handed me on to a girl friend; no sooner had I seen one depart than I had to meet another one off the next boat. I didn't realize how things were going for a bit until, one fine day, I woke up in the bed of a magnate's widow! Phew, I was out of that bed like a scalded cock; you couldn't see me for dust! I 'as me pride; I do draw the line at becoming a gigolo, if you know what that is, Polly, my girl."

Polly still lay as flaccid as a silken scarf, but she was listening; I saw her dark lashes fluttering against her cheek.

"I cut my losses and bolted in alarm, leaving all my fine clothes and the salary owing to me and all. I thought if I stay, or if I go back for anything, I'll probably take the line of least resistance, accept the feather-bed life, and all the rest of it. So I didn't take the risk. Well, it's not easy to get a job in those circumstances. You've got to have references. I'd have liked a job as steward in a liner, or something of the sort, but shipping lines are a bit careful whom they take on nowadays. There were no family friends, no people who would help me for the sake of my father, influential relations—nothing like that. I'm not grumbling, just stating the fact. That's how it has always been with me. Though I'm a good all-round mechanic and pretty useful with my hands, I'm not skilled at any one thing. And anyway, I didn't want to be a labourer. I tried selling encyclopaedias for a fortnight, fifty quid the set. I didn't sell one set in two weeks, but I got a great many cups of tea, and several invitations to the cinema. The ladies all told me to call back when they had talked it over with their husbands, and when I did call back the atmosphere was generally several degrees below zero!"

I took another pull of brandy from the thick pottery cup and looked out at the blue sky above the great barn roof; I reflected that I wouldn't have that fortnight over again for anything.

"Well, I nosed round a bit looking for an outdoor job that wasn't too strenuous and I got fixed up with a trainer assisting the stable boys, quite by chance, at a racehorse training stable run by a decent chap called Fennel; at least, I thought he was decent. But it seems the police had their eye on Fennel over this horse-doping racket. Personally, I think Fennel was absolutely honest, but by sheer bad luck one of the horses he'd trained was given a shot of dope just before a race and 'went slow'. They never discovered who did it, but the Jockey Club turned him off their lists. They're very strict about that sort of thing, as you know. So Fennel was ruined and his staff all out of a job. People weren't too keen to employ a stable lad from Fennel's stable, so once again I was fluid, mobile. I got a job, quite well paid, fruit-picking in the Vale of Evesham, but when winter came they paid everyone off

and I went back to London. Then, right at the beginning of the football season, Polly, my love, I won a hundred pounds in a pool. One hundred quid!"

She was listening now all right. She was still leaning back in her chair, but her eyes were wide open.

"Well, there was a horse I knew—oh, it's an ordinary little story, Polly. I'd known this horse intimately and I knew, we all knew in Fennel's stable, that it was a coming horse. I saw it was running its first race at Kempton Park and I said to myself, 'No, I'm not going to risk that hundred quid.' I thought, 'I'll spend that hundred quid wisely on something that'll help to set me up.' I was a porter in Covent Garden helping to shove vegetables on and off lorries at that time and I went on thinking about that damned horse, but still I kept my hundred quid notes in my pocket and congratulated myself on being a wise guy."

"Go on," Polly prompted; "what happened?"

"Well, on that job you start even before daybreak, and you've finished work by midday. I thought I'd go off down to Kempton Park and watch the race and maybe put ten bob on my horse for a win. But first of all I went into a pub . . ." I paused. "Is there any need for me to finish this story, Polly? You must guess the end."

"You went into a pub . . ."

"I'm not a drunk, as you know, far from it. But there are times when I've had a drink I want another and another, and I lose what little sense of responsibility I have. What the hell, I feel!"

"You do," Polly agreed; "you feel like that far too easily, George."

"It's because I've no roots. Well, after I came out of the pub I got off to the station and into the little old train for Teddington, Twickenham and Kempton Park. And in the train—oh, Polly—this sounds a lot worse than it was, really it does."

"Go on. In the train you met a man——"

"A bookmaker on the side——"

"How did you know he was a bookie?"

"That's just it, and I've knocked about the world a bit!

Anyway, I remember, I was pleased, repeat pleased, to have the opportunity of handing over my hundred quid to such a fine fellow and at such a very fine price. We were buddies; I could almost think we stepped out of the train and on to that little platform at Kempton Park arm-in-arm!"

"Go on, George."

"I can hardly bear to, Polly. It sounds like 'things I heard at mother's knee'! Well, my lovely horse, my beauty, my darling horse came in at—hold it, Polly –at twenty to one! I just waited to watch her brought in, all steaming and grinning with pride, and then I went off to find my bloke at the place we agreed to meet——"

"And he wasn't there."

"Exactly. I went straight to the station and he wasn't there, nor had there been a train since the race. So I went back to the racecourse and bought a quart bottle of ale and went off into the undergrowth with it, drinking out of it there, unseen, so that I could watch people leaving the course. I saw him presently. What a nerve he had! He was walking away perfectly normally with a sickening smug smile on his face. There's a short cut to the station, down a sandy track. I was off after him at once and followed him down that track for about twenty yards. Then I didn't wait for an explanation or anything, I simply set on him."

"Oh, George!"

"Exactly. He swore afterwards that he'd waited at our meeting-place and I hadn't turned up and that he'd given up waiting and decided to go back to London and look for me next day in Covent Garden market so that he could hand over the cash. As luck would have it, it came on to pour with rain after that particular race and he said that he was browned off with the weather and decided not to wait till the last race."

"So you—attacked him."

"Yes. I sprang on him from behind and dragged him off the track and I nearly killed him. I'd got that bottle with me and I let him have it good and proper. I was damned angry. I only stopped because I thought I had killed him. There was blood everywhere. I'd dragged him well aside from the path and looked in his pockets. His wallet was bulging. I took out

all the notes—there were hundreds of them—and put his notecase back, and beat it. Someone saw me run out of the undergrowth, in fact several people saw me, but didn't pay any attention. Well, I'll tell you, Polly, when I got into the train I felt like death. I was sick as a dog, out of the window. There were several people in the carriage and I had to explain that I'd fallen with a bottle and cut myself about a bit. That seemed to satisfy them all right. Then I settled down and started to think.

When they found the body would I be connected with it in any way? I thought carefully. There had been other people in the railway carriage on the way down, but some had got in and some had got out at the various stations, and everyone had seemed to be minding their own business. We were just two unremarkable men on their way to the races, discussing form; I didn't suppose anyone would ever remember us. A number of people had got out at Kempton Park for the races, but I didn't think it likely that any of them had noticed us particularly. People don't, you know. Not unless something happens to recall the journey to mind. Then they think hard and what they remember may be accurate and it may not. As far as I could tell we were two anonymous men, going to the races. When I got back to London I looked at the evening paper and there was nothing. It was only the lunch-time edition, of course, but I was in such a foolish state that this fact escaped me along with a great many others. I went off to my miserable lodging in Holloway and when I got into my room I took out the cash and started to count it. There were over eighty ten-pound notes and a whole lot of single pound notes. I stopped counting at the eighty——"

Polly leaned forward. "Was it murder?"

I shook my head.

"You must have been pleased!"

"Pleased! I was never so glad about anything in my life. I've never stopped being glad, Polly."

"How did they trace you?"

"Well, it was splashed all over the evening papers, the later editions. But I didn't see it. I was sound asleep." I laughed a little, thinking of Eugene Aram again. "There's a poem

about a man who committed murder, it says: 'With fevered eyes like burning glass, he stared aghast at sleep.' But I didn't. I slept like an exhausted dog till the landlady-woman's husband woke me up at three ack emma and I went off to work as usual."

"And the police were waiting for you?"

"No, it wasn't as quick as that, Polly. My bloke took twenty-four hours to come round, with the police sitting by his bedside, pencils poised, notebooks at the ready. It took him another twenty-four hours to pull himself together well enough to remember all about me, and then he spilt the beans good and proper. It's quite surprising that he should have been as vicious as he was; you don't often find one crook all out to get another gaoled, or do you? He was a first-class con. man. That is a confidence trickster, Polly. He must have prided himself on his ability or he would never have picked on me; I ought to have known my onions. Anyway, he was almighty clever. He'd never been caught, nor was he even suspected. The police were eating out of his hand. He said he'd met me in one of the bars and we'd got talking and he'd taken out his wallet to pay for a round of drinks and at the time he'd thought I'd taken a good look at his wad of notes. It had come on to rain and as he'd had no luck that day he'd left the racecourse early; he'd heard footsteps behind him and then he'd been set upon. He described me in minute detail, told them where I worked—well, they were round me like wasps round the marmalade in a matter of minutes, hot-foot from the bedside. I'd got the wallet and all the notes on me because I hadn't known what to do with them. I'd no proof whatever that some of the notes were mine and that they'd been pinched from me by a confidence trick, so there I was, caught red-handed, even to the drops of blood on my suit!"

"I see," Polly said. She seemed to have quite recovered from her shivering, and though she was still pale she was composed.

"Things went badly with me all along, except that my lawyer feller got the charge altered from 'Attempted Murder' to 'Robbery with Violence', and made a lot of it being a first offence. I didn't get a bail, and it was the Central Criminal Court, the Old Bailey, y'know, with all the proper crooks.

But all the time, Polly, I was happy. That's a silly sort of confession to make, isn't it? I was happy, because he was alive, and I wasn't a murderer. Almost, but not quite!"

CHAPTER XVII

MR. MERRY wasn't long spreading the news about Polly. The first person to speak to me about it was Mrs. Merry. She seemed delighted; I don't think she cared one way or the other who was the father of the child so long as it was not John. I think she felt that this put Polly finally and for ever out of John's aegis.

I could not help feeling some sympathy for John Merry. His face wore a stricken look and he went about his work in a preoccupied way, almost stepping over little Mary Tiffin whenever she got in his way.

Our ridiculous sleeping arrangements continued, Mary coming up to Hill Farm every evening and I going down to Cloud. I noticed that the bed from the front room at Hill Farm, which was still ostensibly my room, disappeared; I inferred that it had been taken up to Polly's room to replace the four-poster, but nothing was said about it.

Summer now seemed to burst upon us in all its glory; you could almost watch the corn growing. I went down to the bottom field where the hay was growing and stood, like a good husbandman, wondering when to start cutting. A strong summer breeze bowed the hay before it so that it looked more beautiful than any woman's tawny silken hair.

Women! I thought sourly; give me a hayfield every time. I could not forget Polly's convictions about myself, whether she still believed it or not I did not know, the smarting was still there. She had given every appearance of forgiving and forgetting by snuggling up to me and whispering, "I suppose I'm a gangster's moll." "Gangster's moll!" I had snorted. "For 'gangster's moll' read 'farmer's wife'!" But that didn't appeal to her. I was sure the words "gangster's moll" flitted through her mind a dozen times a day.

What flitted through my mind was a line left over from the large amount of Bible-reading to which we were subjected in gaol: *Who smote Abimelech . . . did not a woman cast a piece of millstone upon him from the wall, that he died . . .?*

Sourly, then, I inspected my hayfield.

My hayfield? Polly's hayfield, of course.

. . . . .

Presently I saw Mary Tiffin's wistful little face looking at me through the hedge. She had a ferocious-looking sickle in her hand and was engaged in tidying the hedge.

"Hallo, Mary," I said. "I think I'll start cutting the hay next week if the weather holds up."

And then I saw she had been crying. It's too much, I thought. Women all over the place, you can't get away from them. And they're always in a state about something or other. I walked off, but I couldn't leave the little thing like a bedraggled sparrow stuck in the hedge. I soon turned back and asked her what was the matter. There was the usual sniffing and denial that anything was the matter but in just about the average time she came clean.

"George, they think the baby is yours. Mrs. Edge's baby."

"Who do?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Merry. I heard them talking about it; it was horrid. They seemed to think everyone else who heard about it would think so too."

Now, I thought, she's going to ask me if it is my baby. But she didn't. There seemed to be something else on her mind. What she said was, "What will the police think when they hear about it?"

"Police!" I exclaimed. "What on earth has it got to do with them?"

"Well . . ."

"Well?"

"Well . . ."

"Three holes in the ground! But look, Mary," I said, "if you've got anything to say for heaven's sake say it, girl."

But she didn't seem to be able to get it out. I helped her.

"I suppose you mean they'll think the baby a good reason for getting Mr. Edge out of the way?"

She nodded, looking at me with her very soul in her eyes.

"*Et tu, Brute,*" I said, but she didn't understand. "Mary, do you think I—I . . . ?"

"But I wouldn't blame you," she said hurriedly. "I wouldn't blame you, George. Mr. Edge was a horrid old man."

"Another gangster's moll," I sighed; "you women!"

Mary had scrambled through the hedge now, she was wearing her land-girl breeches and a khaki shirt open at the neck. She was sunburned and her hair was of the same tawny shade as the hayfield. I turned away. What is there about me that makes women delighted to believe the very worst about me and, instead of rejecting me with cries of horror and alarm, make it clear that they are more than willing to share my sins with me?

She came after me and touched my elbow but I shrugged her hand off.

"I had nothing whatsoever to do with Mr. Edge's death, Mary. Get that."

"Why did you go back?" she said. "I didn't tell the police, but I've thought about nothing else."

It is strange how that small incident which clearly imprinted itself on the minds of at least two other people should entirely have escaped my memory.

"I was off for an evening out and I left my money in the pocket of my old jacket. I turned when I got halfway to Lambing and went back to my room for it."

"Your face looked so—so grim. We waved, but you didn't wave back."

"I don't know anything about my face," I snapped. "I've told you the truth. It was thoughtful of you to keep your dark secret locked in your breast when you were being questioned by the police—but quite unnecessary, as it happens."

"All the better then," she said, and I could almost imagine she sounded disappointed.

"But if you feel you must go on brooding darkly about something—try and discover how Argo got out that night."

"Why?"

"If you don't think Mr. Edge's death was an accident, and you seem unwilling to, you must think someone arranged it. If you can possibly decide that it wasn't I, then who was it? It was someone who fixed the gas and the pan of milk just so, who left Mr. Edge resting as usual on the sofa with, probably, cats all over him and Argo lying beside him on the floor, and went off through the bolted door. But how did Argo get out, so that when Mr. Edge was dead the dog sat outside howling to the moon? Think that one out, my dear Mary Tiffin."

"I'll try," she said vaguely, "because I'm so worried for you. The way the police keep on coming round!"

"I'm not worried," I told her, "so why should you be?" I patted her shoulder. "Cheer up, there's a good girl. You're too much alone. What you should do now is to catch John Merry on the rebound. If you give all your time to that you won't have time to worry unnecessarily about me."

And what's more, I thought, if you give all your mind to it you'll get him. What a woman wants she gets; with a man now, it is different.

Did not a woman, I thought as I walked away, *cast a piece of millstone . . . ?*—and so on.

. . . . .

I have been scribbling away hard now for seven weeks, with certain intervals.

There is not very much time left; soon I shall be leaving the little room in which I am now writing, and my two companions, for ever. I had hoped to read over what I have written, but if I am to finish my story there will not be time.

I can only hope that I do not appear to have presented myself in any particular light; if it would seem that I have, I can only say that it is unintentional. I have written down my story as dispassionately as I am able, in chronological order, fact by fact; if, in the reading of it there appears glaringly the truth of my story as a whole, then well and good, but if in the telling I appear to be boastful and vain, then I apologize now; maybe I am boastful and vain, I wouldn't know.

My two companions are sitting in their hard little chairs, one of them is doing his football pools, the other is reading *John Bull*. I have just said to one of them, "Am I boastful and vain?" He jumped perceptibly and said, "Beg pardon?" Then he looked for help to the other, the more resourceful of the two. "Is he boastful or vain?" Number One said with a jerk of his head in my direction. Number Two looked at me over the top of his glasses: "Don't you start chewing yourself up, old cock; you're no worse than the rest of us."

Thus encouraged, I press on to the part of my story which is the most difficult to tell.

. . . . .

If the fact that Polly Edge was going to have a child had been announced by the B.B.C. the news could hardly have travelled more quickly; it would seem that within a few hours there was not a man, woman, child, bird or beast in the whole of Bedfordshire who had not heard it.

Amongst others Madge Clay heard it. If anything were needed to underline my devotion to Polly it would seem it was that. Madge could hardly imagine, knowing as she did that I loved Polly, that the child was Eli's.

Whatever her thoughts may have been, however, she flung herself forthwith into action. Firstly she sent over the Duke of Retford's agent, about whom she had often spoken to me, to propose that I take over the job which I had already turned down. He was a pleasant enough fellow, obviously devoted to Madge; he went away mildly sorry that he had not been able to persuade me. Next she brought over an extreme old shooting-brake which I had noticed standing in an open shed in the yard at The Flagpole. I had understood it to belong to her brother, but now she presented it to me, taking me down the green to where she had left it at the gate. "There you are, George, it's all yours."

"I don't want it," I snapped, though I wanted it very badly indeed.

"Now, don't be proud," she laughed. "You have it, we never use it; it is only going to rack and ruin. You can

pay me a small token sum for it, if it makes you feel any better."

"Look, Madge," I said, "take the thing away and stay away yourself, there's a good girl. Polly isn't well and I've a lot to do. You're a distraction."

She looked at me for a long time, all sorts of expressions flitting across her face. I stood uncomfortably there in the road, waiting for her to go. I could feel Ma Merry looking at us through her kitchen window.

Madge stepped a little nearer; she put out a hand and touched my arm: "Polly's child is yours, isn't it, George?"

"No, indeed," I said, looking at her straight in the eyes; "it is Edge's child. Edge hoped very much for a child."

"Liar!"

I turned and left her then, walking back up the green, past the milkcans which stood at the gate awaiting collection. I went through the farmyard and into the scullery and straight up into the corn-loft where I shovelled some corn into a sack, intending to take it down for the hens. But whilst I was loading the sack Madge came back. She stood at the scullery door and called my name once or twice. I kept absolutely still because I did not want her to know that I was there. But Polly came out into the scullery. I think she had been upstairs in her room, lying down on the bed. I heard her say, "Do you want anything, Miss Clay?"

Madge sounded exasperated. "Yes, I want George."

"I don't know where he is."

"He can't be far away; I followed him back up the green."

There was silence. I expect Polly shrugged her shoulders and turned away. Then I heard Madge say, "I'm so pleased to hear about the baby, Mrs. Edge."

"I expect everyone knows now," I heard Polly say.

"Mr. Edge would have been thrilled."

Polly murmured something.

Then Madge said, "I've brought the old shooting-brake over for George; he says he doesn't want it."

Polly said, "Oh." Nothing else.

Madge said: "Isn't he a fool? I've offered to give it to him. I'd rather he had it than that it should go to rack and ruin

in our cartshed. After the smash-up with the Land Rover I'd have thought George would leap at it. The brakes aren't too good but George is a super mechanic. I thought he'd enjoy fiddling about with the old thing."

Polly evidently resented Madge's friendly references to me. She said, somewhat tartly, "I dare say we'll run to a new Land Rover some time, thank you all the same."

I could hear that "we" knocking round the walls, I could also feel the temperature rise. I wished I was anywhere but where I was, but I had to let the two women fight it out. I would have given a lot to be out of earshot, but as I wasn't I wished I could see the faces of the two. I don't know whether Polly was looking sad or arrogant or what. But whatever way she was looking caused Madge to burst out, "Oh, Polly . . ." I think she cried a little into her handkerchief. There was a low mumbling. I heard Polly step across to her, perhaps she put an arm across her shoulders comfortingly. Anyway, she said, "But I love him too."

Then Madge said: "But you've got everything, Polly. You've got every man you ever meet at your feet. I've never loved any man before, not like this!"

"Neither have I," Polly said simply.

"I can't understand it," Madge said.

"You don't have to," Polly replied. "It's just a fact."

Madge said, "If you'd only let go of him he'd come to me, I know, but you're binding him to you, you're greedy——"

And Polly said: "But you don't know what you're talking about. You wouldn't want George Sudley, a young lady like you. He's an ex-gaolbird."

There was another silence, a stiff one, then Polly said, "He has just served time; three-and-a-half years for robbery with violence."

I thought neither of them would ever speak again, but at last Madge spoke, at least I took it to be Madge, but her voice had changed to a startling degree. "There's no accounting for taste, is there? I don't mind an ex-gaolbird, as you call it, if he happens to be George Sudley; you don't mind a man who can't make up his mind which of us he loves."

"What do you mean?" Polly said sharply.

"I don't know whether your child is Eli's or not," Madge told her, "but everyone thinks the father is George. In spite of the fact that he has, I daresay, spent as many nights with me as with you."

I didn't take that in for a moment or two.

"What do you mean?" Polly said sharply.

"The last time was the night Eli died."

"That night," Polly said slowly, "he came back to me——"

"From me," Madge answered with a wild laugh.

I banged the shovel down on the floor of the corn-loft.

"My God!" I shouted. "That's too much!" I rattled down the rickety stairs enraged. "You've just called me a liar," I yelled, "but——"

Madge fled. I ran after her to shake the life out of her, but she flew off down the green like a hare. I could have caught her but I could not have shaken her in full view of the Merrys' windows. I let her go. She slammed down the door of the shooting-brake and drove off along the lane hysterically.

. . . . . .

If I am the villain of this piece, Jim Turner is a close second. He drove the milk-lorry round the corner of Cloud Lane on starboard wheels, he was on his way to collect the milkcans from Hill Farm and from the Merrys'. The lorry collided head-on with the old shooting-brake. He was uninjured but Madge Clay was badly hurt. Her pelvis was broken and her face was cut seriously.

Later on Jim Turner will be sued for heavy damages, which, no doubt, his firm will have to pay. But for the moment he has been imprisoned for dangerous driving. He has got two months.

But Madge has got a lifer.

. . . . . .

In the meantime there was Polly. . . .

She was standing where Madge had left her, as white and

cold as a small statue. I took her in my arms, but she was unresponsive.

"Polly, love isn't like this, you know. If you really loved me you wouldn't go on like this. You would trust me as you trust yourself. Why once, not so very long ago, you said, 'You are me.' Remember? That's love, but this isn't, this blow hot, blow cold. If you really love someone you don't hate them the next minute, tearing them to pieces with cruel words."

"That's the way I love you."

"It seems to be," I said thoughtfully; maybe it was something to do with her chemistry and the colour of her hair. I knew, too, to reach the heights that Polly and I have known one must also plumb the depths. Perhaps it was worth it. But I sighed. It was exhausting.

"I shall never be sure," Polly murmured.

"Then, Polly, you don't love me. How can you? You say you can't ever be sure! Ever be sure that I didn't leave Madge Clay's arms that night and come to you? How can you!" I repeated with some disgust. "I don't believe it –you know perfectly well I didn't. You enjoy tearing yourself to bits like this. My heaven, one would fare a great deal better with a placid, constant little creature like Mary Tiffin."

It was an unfortunate remark.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Coo!" Ma Merry exclaimed some time later. "I was in London for two months at the height of the blitz, there were 'incidents' galore, but honestly, it was nothing to what we've seen here at Cloud this summer!"

Soon, very soon now, it will all be over and Cloud Farm will settle down again into the humdrum. John will marry Mary and the only events will be the arrival, at regular intervals, of little Merrys.

New people will take Hill Farm, Mrs. Merry will not find them interesting. She will look back nostalgically to old times. "It all began that day George Sudley went up there after a

job," she will say in the aftertime. But no one will want to hear. Only, perhaps, when her grandchildren grow up will they be interested in "The Sudley Saga" or "The Saga of Eli Edge", but even they will get a little tired of hearing it over and over again.

This time it was Mary Tiffin who brought the news. Her face was greenish-white. "There's been a terrible accident," she said. "The milk-lorry crashed into Miss Clay's utility van. She'd been here, hadn't she? You'd better come down and see if you can help, George. Mrs. Merry sent me to tell you. They have 'phoned for an ambulance. There's blood everywhere."

"Is she hurt?"

"It looks as though she's dead to me. Her face"—Mary buried her own face in her hands—"it's horrible . . ."

It was an unpleasant shock; Madge had been standing there not ten minutes ago.

"Stay here with Polly," I told Mary, "and Polly, get her some of that brandy, she looks as though she needs it."

They had carried poor Madge into the shop and they had covered her face with a clean white towel. I got another bad shock when I saw her, but she was not dead, the towel was to hide her face from the eyes of the helpers, who could not bear to see it.

I went to the hospital with her in the ambulance.

"Husband?" they asked me.

"No."

"Next of kin?"

"No," I said, "just a friend."

They operated twice and the two operations were done by different surgeons. First her pelvis was set and she was encased in plaster of paris, and then her face was attended to. I was there for hours. It seemed that apart from her brother, who was away at sea, Madge's nearest relations were aunts, who were hurrying to her bedside, but in the meantime there was no near relative, so I stayed. When the face operation was over the surgeon came into the waiting room to see me. "I've done my best," he said, "but it is a shocking mess."

"Will she be very disfigured?"

"These things always seem worse at the time," he answered; "when it is all healed up it may not be as bad as I think. The cuts are perfectly clean. The miracle is that her eyes are all right, though one eyebrow is badly cut; it may droop."

"Then she will be disfigured?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. From what I hear of the accident it seems it was the other feller's fault."

"Indeed it was. He's a notoriously bad driver."

"Then she'll probably get big damages."

"She was a good-looking girl. No amount of damages can put her face right."

"Engaged to her?"

"No. She wasn't engaged."

"Pity," the surgeon murmured.

"Looks aren't everything," I said vigorously, and I wondered afterwards just what had made me say that. "She's got personality; she's a grand girl."

"Good," the surgeon said dryly. "Well, I'll have another go at the face later on. I'll do my very best, you can rest assured."

And he went off home to his own pretty wife.

A little nurse came into the waiting-room. "You are George, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"The lady is asking for you."

"Has she come round?"

"Not properly. She's crying and calling for you," the nurse said apologetically. "We mustn't let her cry, you know. The tears will smart horribly on her poor face."

So I followed the nurse along the corridors to a small room at the end of the women's surgical ward, the little ward into which, I assumed, they put people who were going to die.

The bed was covered with a large wire frame to keep the bedclothes from touching her, and her face and head were bandaged all over, leaving only a tiny slit for the eyes. She was very restless; as she came round out of the anæsthetic two nurses had to hold her. She was gabbling away; fortunately it was not easy to make out what she was saying, only one word came out frequently and distinctly; it was "George".

I held her hand and whilst I kept a warm pressure on it she was quiet; as soon as I let go she started again.

"You'd better stay the night," the nurse said. "Do you mind, dear?"

Mind? Yes, I minded a great deal, but what did it matter whether I minded or not? John Merry or the Tiffin would have milked the cows, the two farms would have settled down for the night. Mary and Polly, in their several rooms, would lay their unblemished faces on their cool pillows and sleep peacefully. The sweet summer breeze would waft their bedroom curtains inwards and would blow across Polly's perfect face and across the Tiffin's homely one, but never again would Madge lay an unblemished face on her pillow, she would lie sleepless, with her rucked, scarred and lined face against a pillow wet with tears.

Yes, I minded a lot, but I stayed and held her hand and heard a nearby church clock striking away the hours.

About three o'clock, when life is supposed to be at its lowest ebb, the night sister and I had to hold Madge still.

"Isn't she strong!" the sister remarked. "She'll do herself some injury if we're not careful." The effect of the morphia injection Madge had had was wearing off.

"Can't she have some more morphia?" I asked.

"The doctor said not if she was all right."

"She's bad now." I struggled to keep her against the pillow.

"If you could hold on alone I'll run and fetch the house man," sister told me. "Perhaps he'll give her an injection."

The house surgeon came, he gave me a brisk look but said nothing and gave Madge an injection in her arm. Then he went away and the sister sat down beside the bed on the other side from me.

"You can leave me alone with her now," I said. "I think she'll be all right."

"I'll wait a wee while until it starts to work."

Presently Madge turned her head in my direction and said in a husky, though surprisingly normal voice, "Am I going to die, George?"

"No, Madge, you aren't. You're quite badly smashed up, but you're not too bad, my dear."

She put up her hand and felt the bandages round her face. "I'm going to look a mess, aren't I?"

"It will heal," I murmured.

"I feel lovely now," she whispered; "so comfortable. Have you been here all the time, George?"

"Um."

She pressed my hand and lay for some minutes in silence. Then she said: "This is the way it will be when we are married. So peaceful—nothing more to worry about."

There was another long silence. I said to the sister: "There's really no need for you to stay. Don't you want a meal?"

She bent over Madge. "Yes, dear," she said to me, "I'll go and have something to eat now. Your fiancée's gone off to sleep, the poor dear."

The hospital burst into noisy life about six ack emma with the staff dancing some weird fandango to the sound of native music beaten out on the metal bedpans. The patients were rudely awakened and given their early-morning tea. I was stiff and tired after a night of sitting bolt upright on a hard chair.

. . . . .

I retreated in not very good order. I had a shave in the barber's shop near the bus station and got the workman's bus back to Lambing. I heard a great rattling of cans as I approached the farm and found Mary Tiffin in her holland overall valiantly scouring out the milk pails.

"Thank goodness you're back, George. Miss Clay isn't dead, we heard. How is she?"

"She might be worse," I said curtly. "Did you think I wouldn't be back? Why are you doing all this, Mary?"

"Polly's gone. The Merrys sent me up here to keep things going until you came back."

"Gone? Where to?"

"To her parents."

"How long for?"

"I dunno. She seemed very upset after Miss Clay's accident. She said she couldn't carry on; she'd go home for a few days, she said."

"For a few days?"

Mary nodded. "John took her most of the way in his car."

"Did she take a case and things with her?"

"Yes, a hand-case. There was nobody here last night. I slept at Cloud; I daren't sleep here alone."

"Of course not," I agreed absently.

Polly gone. I think it was the biggest shock of the lot. Whether it was for days, weeks or months, I did not care. She was gone. I found the cold fact almost unbearable. We had parted in the middle of a misunderstanding and now I did not know in what frame of mind she might be: resentful, heartbroken, wrathful? I wouldn't know. I could go after her and find out; I could run her to earth and have it out with her in Mum's stuffy little front parlour; I could write to her and ask her what the hell. Or I could get down to work and stick it.

Almost automatically I took the last course.

I worked like a fiend and never for one moment ceased to think about Polly. I gave the barn the biggest clean-up of its life, heaving out all the old straw and making a neat heap of it inside the cowshed for winter use, turning out all the old dried hay and brushing up sacksful of chaff and dust, leaving everything neat and clean for the hay harvest and, later, for the corn. It took several days of really hard work, unpleasant work, that stifled the nostrils and dried the throat and prickled the eyes and ought to have deadened brain activity but rather sharpened it. In those few days I lived through every scene I had had with Polly over and over again, all our conversations returned to me, word for word; I remembered every turn of her head and every flicker of her creamy eyelids; I remembered the feel of her breast against mine and her warm breath on my cheek.

Then I took to speculating, in what way have I failed? How otherwise could I have treated Polly? Where have I gone wrong? I could think of a great many mistakes I had made and I felt that if I could only have the time over again I should

have acted very differently. But that didn't help me now. Over and over again the unpleasant thought recurred: Polly is not very deep, she is not very intelligent, she doesn't really understand me. She's ready to forgive and forget, bless her, but she still thinks I got Eli out of the way. If I as good as committed a murder once she sees no reason why I shouldn't do so again. She's gone because she is frightened of me. If we marry we won't live happily ever after because of what Polly will always have at the back of her mind.

Yet, what could I do? How could I prove to her that Eli's death was an accident? I couldn't. For a moment or two I savoured the feeling of frustration that Inspector Hope must have. It could never be proved. Never.

. . . . .

Never?

I slept in the upstairs room that Mary Tiffin had used. Each night I staggered up to bed after my day's work, tired out, and slept profoundly, with Argo at the foot of the bed.

The dog now attached himself to me, following me about with a wistful, questioning look in his eyes. He did not grin up at me like he used to grin up at Eli, but I think he took to me as a poor substitute. He would not be left alone downstairs, nor did he like lying on the chilly lino, so I let him lie at the foot of the bed, and what the hell?

The beastly little stuffed owl which stood on the big chest at the top of the stairs seemed to blink, or even wink, like a conspirator at me every time I went up to bed. He knew how the first Mrs. Edge would have disapproved of Argo coming upstairs, but that, it would seem, was not all he knew.

The day will come, I told Owl, when I shall smash your cover to smithereens and tear you up and throw your beastly dusty feathers all over the farmyard for the hens to jeer at. He blinked blandly back at me for he knew that I would never dare, I am far too superstitious.

One night I awoke suddenly and heard myself saying, "I've got an idea." I lay quite still wondering what the idea

could have been, when I was either smitten by another idea or the idea I had had popped from the subconscious into the conscious mind.

I jumped out of bed and took my torch, leaving Argo sleeping at the foot of the bed. Or rather, he was pretending to be asleep, for he lay quite prone but I could feel at least one yellow eye was wide open.

I crept downstairs and then I remembered that there was no need to creep, there was nobody else in the house. I shone the torch on to the clock in the living-room; it was twenty past one and a fine summer's night.

But no, it wasn't fine. It was pouring with rain, straight-falling, sweet, growing rain; I could hear it hissing down.

I went through the door from the living-room into the little front lobby in what had been my quarters, holding the lighted torch. The front door was shut and locked, which it had not been on the night Eli died. It was never shut during the day when I occupied the rooms; I had certainly not shut it before going for my evening out.

Well, anyway, it was shut now. I took my raincoat off the peg and put it on. Then I went back into the Edges' living-room, shutting the door between it and the front of the house and *bolting it* as it had been bolted the night Eli died. On my way through the living-room I bolted the outside door. The bolt must have been as old as the house, it was rusty, but effectual. I then bolted the back door of the scullery; I had never used the door but it was used by the Edges to go across to the "little hut". Finally I bolted the door of the scullery.

Then I stood in the middle of the scullery and asked myself how the devil I was going to get out.

There was the corn-loft. I went up the rickety steps to the loft, giving the cat family quite a turn. There were two very elderly doors, opening outwards, which had once been used for corn. But since I had been there they had never been used, the secret store of sacks of corn which Eli kept up there had been dragged up the stairs by Eli himself. I shone my torch on the doors; there were planks nailed across the two doors, so that was that. I went down again.

How, how, how? It was like a headache. But *how*?

I unbolted the front scullery door and went out into the pouring rain. Then I shut the door firmly behind me and secured it with a piece of washing-line which hung on the wall alongside. I tied the cord round the handle and round the latch firmly.

Then I went across the farmyard, sloshing through the mud, and called to Argo.

It was pitch dark, but warm. I liked the feeling of the gentle rain on my face and head.

"Argo, Argo!" I called, and whistled and whistled again.

I turned up the collar of my raincoat and paced up and down, waiting to hear the noises peculiar to any dog who wants to be let out. I waited one minute, maybe two, or perhaps three. And then I called again, but even as I called there was a damp, cool muzzle in the palm of my hand, and I jumped.

"Good heavens! How did you get there?"

It was so weird that I shivered; I had gone all goose-flesh. I hurried across to the scullery door and examined it by the light of the torch, the cord was exactly as I had fixed it. I felt like a stooge in one of Mr. Maskelyne's conjuring shows. I caressed Argo's silky ears, assuring myself that it was indeed he and not the Abominable Snowman.

"All right, my dog," I said, "if you can get out you can also get in, and even if I don't see how you get in you have got muddy paws, and in the morning I shall go round and look for muddy paw marks."

Argo tried to push into the house with me, but I kept him out until I was inside and then bolted the door. He must have thought it odd, to say the least of it, when I started whistling and calling him as soon as I was inside. He answered through his nose, the way he always did when he was shut out.

"Get in the way you got out, since you're so clever," I shouted at him.

He was outside about half an hour. He was making a good deal of noise but never once did he howl the way he had the night Eli died. I had to let him in in the end.

"All right," I told him as we settled down to sleep again,

"you needn't think you've won, I shall try that again in the morning. I'll watch you getting out, in broad daylight," I threatened. But he pretended to be asleep.

. . . . .

But when the morning came all thoughts of games of legerdemain with Argo were put right out of my head.

I was wanted at the hospital.

"What hospital?" I asked, playing for time.

"Where Miss Clay is, of course," Mary Tiffin answered. They had sent a telephone message through to the Merrys and Mary had come up to me with it.

"Mrs. Merry didn't say I'd go, did she?"

"Well, of course," Mary said with big eyes.

"I can't go, I'm far too busy."

Mary continued to look at me reproachfully.

"Miss Clay has plenty of friends and relations of her own," I said uncomfortably, "why pick on me?"

I avoided Mary's eyes and crashed on, " 'What is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her?' "

"She's very fond of you, I expect," Mary said, as though answering my rhetorical question.

Did being fond of someone entitle you to possess them?

"Look," I declared, "I'm not going. She'll have all her aunts and relations there, plenty of people round her."

"But it is you they want."

"They?"

"The surgeon, I suppose. Anyway, they said that Miss Clay's bandages were being taken off this morning and that the surgeon would like to see you. Mrs. Merry said you'd be there."

I picked up the handles of the barrow and wheeled it across the farmyard and into the barn. Oh, I would go, I knew I would go, but there was still a little resistance left.

She followed me, of course. "You're so kind, George, usually."

Kind! I hadn't thought of that one. Was I *kind*?

"That's the last thing anyone could accuse me of," I muttered.

"Nonsense! Everyone thinks you're kind. It would be dreadfully unkind if yourdidn't go to the hospital this morning. You couldn't not go."

There was a bit more of it and at last I gave in. I told Mary she would have to come too. I had some vague idea that I would appear a little less available if Mary were to come with me. The Merrys agreed to let her go, under the circumstances, and we went off on the bus.

There was a certain amount of waiting about at the hospital and at last the surgeon came into the waiting-room. "Look," he said briskly, "I've taken off the bandages; the poor girl has had a nasty shock. She was bound to, of course."

"Is it very bad, then?"

"It does look pretty bad at the moment, but as the wounds are perfectly healthy I prefer to have them exposed to the air, they do better than when covered with bandages. The psychological effect is what I'm worried about now. A lot depends on you."

I frowned. I said: "I'm not engaged to the girl, or anything, you know, I'm only a friend; I told you that. Hasn't she—isn't there anyone else?"

"She has two aunts fussing about like distracted hens; I don't want them to see her yet, they'll fuss her up badly."

I held back the irritable words "Why pick on me?" behind the barrier of my teeth.

The surgeon, too, frowned. He didn't like me, I could tell. "At a time like this," he said, "a little kindness goes a long way. After all, it's the poor girl's whole life—what I mean is, from now on, whenever she looks in the mirror she's going to shiver. If we can only get her to view this accident in the right light now, right from the start, it'll make a big difference to her. I felt with your help . . ."

There was a long pause. He looked at Mary and wondered how she fitted into the picture. It was plain that he thought I had been, at least, a lover of Madge and now that she was smashed up I was going to leave her cold. It was a very difficult situation indeed. No amount of protestations that Madge had been nothing but a friend was going to convince him.

It was also clear that he considered that he had done enough; he had, after all, a great many other patients. He turned to go.

I caught Mary's eye. "I'll come along with you now, sir . . ."

We walked together, in step, down a long echoing passage. "You must be prepared for a shock," he said, "but keep the sort of expression on your face that you wear at poker. It looks bad at the moment, but the colour will fade rapidly now that the wounds are exposed. In the end they will be quite white and the flesh will smooth itself out pretty considerably."

The day sister and a nurse were standing by Madge's bed. She lay flat on her back, the cage was still over her limbs. She was holding a small looking-glass.

The sister and the nurse were being unnaturally bright, I thought. I don't remember, in the anxiety of the moment, what they said, but the general atmosphere was one of, "Here's your young man, dear, everything will be all right now."

When I looked down at her my heart turned right over. I tried not to gag as before vomiting. My lips were stiff, but I achieved a smile. The surgeon, the sister and the nurse stood in a line at the foot of the bed, like three guardians of my soul. There was no question of letting Madge down or letting Polly down, or anything else. It was a simple matter of humanity. I bent over and kissed her.

CHAPTER XIX

THERE hadn't, after all, been much point in taking Mary Tiffin along with me. She was very quiet going back on the bus, I suppose the expression on my face must have silenced her. In fact she said nothing at all until we were walking back from the Lambing bus stop to Cloud. I had not said a word since we left the hospital. As we turned into our lane I stood for a time looking at the marks on the road, the gash in the grass verge where the accident had happened and the frag-

ments of glass still lying about. Mary stood beside me in mute sympathy.

"You see," I said at last, "the accident wouldn't have happened at all if it hadn't been for me. I was angry with her, very angry. In fact, I was going to shake the life out of her."

"Why?"

"Oh, because of something she said to Polly." I thought over that lie she had told. If her accident had been retribution for the lie then the punishment was out of all proportion to the crime. "She was excited and upset. If she hadn't been she might have succeeded in avoiding the milk-lorry. She was a good driver."

"Was it something about you she said to Mrs. Edge?"

"Um." Sorry, now, that I had spoken, I hurried on along the lane.

"I can guess what it was."

"No, you can't," I said, but gently: "You're only a little schoolgirl, Mary. Of course you can't guess."

Her silence was contemptuous.

At the end of the lane, by the gates to Hill Farm, there was a car parked. A small car and one that was very familiar indeed.

"Oh, my heaven!" I shouted. "This is too much, it's really too much! What does that man Hope want now?"

Ma Merry had evidently been watching for us. She stepped out into the lane. "I've kept your meal hot for you, George. You're to come in and have it now."

"But look!" I pointed to the car.

"Never mind that now; it's that meddlesome man nosing round again. You're to have a meal at once, I insist!"

We ate the meal in silence, Mary and I, at the kitchen table, with Ma Merry hovering over us. When we had finished she said: "Now, Mary, John wants you down at the bottom field, they're haymaking. Hurry along, there's a good girl." In the next breath she turned to me and said: "What happened? Is her face very bad?"

"Terrible," I said; "ghastly."

"And what about the rest of her, the broken bones and all that?"

"She's getting along nicely; she'll be in hospital for a long time yet, but she's healing up very well."

"But her face will always be bad?"

"It will be better than it is now, but—it's pitiful!" I said.

"Oh, George," she said, "you are in a mess, aren't you? However did you come to get yourself into such a mess?"

"You should know," I said shortly.

She took my hand in her two rough ones and held it against her cheek.

. . . . . .

"I've seen this coming," Mrs. Merry reflected. "Miss Clay is one of those spoilt rich girls, never been done out of anything she wanted in her life."

"No, not rich."

"By some standards. You can see she's always had everything she wanted. She set her cap at you, George. I could see it all."

"Well, she's had it now, poor girl. She's ruined."

Ma Merry sighed heavily. "It looks like you'll have to give up Polly; when all is said and done I reckon she can look after herself. But the other one . . ."

"It isn't a question of 'giving up Polly'," I said, using the sort of expressions she would understand. "I'm not *keen* on Polly, I haven't a *crush* on her. I love her. Understand? I love her. I have never loved anyone before; I've never had anyone in my life to love. I suppose I love her with all the love I should have had for my family, if I had ever had a family, father, mother, brother, sister, and I love her passionately, too. I'm not blinded by her beauty, I can see her faults; it wouldn't matter what she did, I would still love her, and I always will. When you love someone like that they become part of you, you can't *give them up*—oh, it's no good, I can't explain——"

"I wish I could help you, George, but I can't see any way out of your troubles. I think you're in great trouble. It looks like fate had it against you, honest it does. When Miss Clay gets better you'll find it's more difficult than ever to—to walk out on her. I wonder if you did the right thing this morning."

"You wouldn't wonder if you'd been there. Only a monster of inhumanity would have said, 'Well, too bad, but nothing to do with me,' " and after a little reflection I added, "You should have seen the expression in her eyes!"

I looked out of the window and above the short curtain I could see the roof of Mr. Hope's small car, still in the lane.

"The inspector is waiting up there for me, I'd better go and see what he wants," I said heavily and left Mrs. Merry's kitchen and Ma Merry standing there, looking after me, with her hands hanging down by her sides.

Inspector Hope and the sergeant had evidently all the time in the world at their disposal. They were sitting by the fence, in front of the living-room door, one on an upturned packing-case I had left there during my turn-out of the barn, and the other on the edge of the wheelbarrow. Inspector Hope was rolling himself a cigarette.

"There you are, Sudley," he said pleasantly enough. "Mrs. Edge out, I gather?"

"Mrs. Edge isn't here at all," I grunted morosely; I felt in no mood for Inspector Hope. "She's gone home to her parents."

"Indeed, that's interesting. Well, I suppose at a time like this a young woman wants her mother."

Time like this?

I caught an almost imperceptible nod that passed from Mr. Hope to the sergeant, and the latter strolled off round the corner of the house.

Very deliberately he completed the rolling of his cigarette and lighted it.

"Terrible accident on the corner last week," he said. For a few minutes we talked about Jim Turner and the proceedings of the magistrates' court and the extent of Madge Clay's injuries. "Well," he said finally, "the hamlet of Cloud has certainly got itself on the map these last few months."

I wondered when he was going to get down to brass tacks, i.e. his reason for coming. I did not kid myself that he had come for a pleasant chat.

At last he said: "Under the circumstances I'm not sorry Mrs. Edge is away. Do you mind if we go indoors, old man?"

Old man?

When we got into the living-room Inspector Hope took a shabby black mackintosh folder out of the capacious pockets of his eternal raincoat. It contained letters, folded sheets of paper, a bundle of photographs, more letters, forms, all slightly grubby, creased and dog-eared. He laid them down on the table, picked out one letter, cleaner and fresher than the rest of the things and put it to one side.

"Treasure trove," he said whimsically.

"What is this junk?"

"Junk? It is all the late Mr. Edge's private papers."

I regarded him steadily.

He said: "I've searched for them everywhere. Almost the first thing I noticed when we made a search of the house was the complete lack of writing amenities. We found a pot of ink and a primitive pen with a nib like a bent pin. We found, over in the old Bible box, a lot of catalogues from firms selling fertilizer and farm implements, odd postcards, some grubby notepaper and envelopes and a lot of worthless oddments. But we couldn't find, for instance, Mr. Edge's identity card, or any of his bank sheets, or any notebooks in which he kept records of his transactions. We couldn't find his birth certificate or any of the things that a careful man like Mr. Edge would be sure to keep."

"He was an illiterate man," I said. "He never did any writing; the late Mrs. Edge did all the business of the farm, and this Mrs. Edge wrote all his important business letters."

"That's as maybe. He was an illiterate man, agreed, but he was a landowner, don't forget. He owned quite considerable property and I'm sure you don't have possessions without a certain number of personal records. Well, anyway, it's all there, which proves my point."

"Where did you find it?"

"Behind the padding of that old sofa Mrs. Edge was in such a hurry to dispose of."

I struggled to control the rush of anger I felt.

He went on in a pleasant, even tone. "The old four-poster bed was on its way out the last time I came up, remember? Then I noticed that the sofa had gone too. It didn't take me

long to infer that all the goods had been taken to the same sale room. So I went along to said sale room and examined the sofa. There was nothing very drastic about the examination. I simply ran my hand along between the seat and the back, you know, that space where women always lose their scissors. There was one spot where the stuffing of the back was quite loose; I put my hand up there and brought out all this. I don't think Mrs. Edge could have known it was there, do you, Sudley?"

"No, no."

"By the way, Sudley. Have you any idea why she was so anxious to get rid of this furniture?"

"None at all, she did not discuss it with me."

"Neither have I. I've done a lot of thinking about it, and still your guess is as good as mine. You see, Sudley, she was going against the law. That's why I, personally, was interested, though, of course, from a human standpoint the psychology of it is interesting too."

Of course Polly had been going against the law. Why had I not thought of that? Eli's will had not been proved. She was not yet entitled to sell anything. If she had only mentioned to me that she was going to dispose of the furniture I might have told her that she couldn't, yet. In any case, I reflected, why was she in such a hurry to get rid of the things?

"I don't know why the folder wasn't found before, but it was missed. It was only the fact that the sofa had gone that made me give it a second thought, many second thoughts, in fact."

Second thoughts! I wondered just how many other second thoughts the inspector was having and whether they were all going to be as effective as this particular lot.

"I knew perfectly well that Mr. Edge did a great deal of business on the side. I've known it for a long time. But there, so do a great many others hereabouts! Mr. Edge was a cautious man, though. He wasn't going to leave his private papers about where anyone could shuffle through them. He put them in the safest place he knew of."

Within an inch or two of his heart. I could see him now, lying there on the mud-coloured moquette, stroking his

eternal cats, his elbow actually pressing against his secrets, such as they were—safe from everyone.

Inspector Hope picked up one of the shabby little notebooks of the kind that used to be twopence but now cost about one shilling and sixpence. There were half a dozen or so similar little books.

"Every little transaction that Mr. Edge had on the side, every dozen black market eggs, every sack of corn, every fowl, are all recorded here. It more than accounts for the money he left. In almost every entry there is a name, or, when the same name occurs over and over again, an initial. This is going to help us a lot in our black market clean-up, I can tell you."

The inspector had finished his cigarette and now, to my dismay, began to make another. It was evident that he was not going yet awhile.

"Know when Mrs. Edge intends to come back?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No idea. I'm keeping the place going for her whilst she's away."

"Quite," he agreed, and added, "she won't be up to much herself for some while, I guess." Which remark, I inferred, was to inform me that he knew Polly was "in an interesting condition".

"Know anything about a Mrs. Banker? A Mrs. Maggie Banker?"

"Isn't she an Edge relative?"

"Yes, Mr. Edge's sister, in fact. She lives at Hall Barton, some thirty miles over in the Cambridge direction."

"She came to the funeral."

"Quite. There is a letter for her here." Inspector Hope picked up the letter he had put aside. "Mr. Edge wrote it one day when he was in some distress of mind. He evidently intended to post it, it was sealed up, but not stamped. He wrote it one day when you were out with Mrs. Edge," the inspector paused and added heavily, "giving her a driving lesson, probably."

"Why wasn't it ever posted?"

"I take it that Mrs. Edge came in from her lesson and made herself so pleasant to her old man that he thought better of it. But he couldn't quite bring himself to destroy it. He put

it away carefully, amongst his other private papers, just in case he might need it again."

"Well, for heaven's sake, what's inside the letter?"

"Read it for yourself."

I snatched it from him. I was sure it was a fake, or some joke which the inspector thought to play on me. But when I had finished the letter I knew damned well it wasn't a fake. I could just see Eli writing that letter, it was exactly like him.

. . .

Dear Maggie, old girl,

There's never been any secrets between you and me, has there, old girl? But you was always the one of us as has your head screwed on right. Common sense's is what Maggie's got but not Eli. You said, at the time, as I didn't ought to marry Polly and by gum old girl youse right. But she's that loveing and sweet and puts her arms round me neck that for the life of me I cant tell her to get out and take her fancy boy with her. She's sly, too for all that shes a loverly girl, comes along ever so sweet with her sleeping tablets and thinks I take them so as when i sham sleep she's out of bed and off downstairs to her fancy boy.

i cud never tel you this to your face I wudn't have the shame, Maggie old girl but I feel a lot better writing to you and now sit down pen in hand to ask you to come along soon and tell Polly off for me the way you know how

ever yrs affectly

Eli.

. . . . . .

Considerately the inspector stood with his back to me, looking out of the window, smoking the cigarette which he had made. When I had read the letter I put it back on the table and started to say something, but I was husky, I could not say it, instead I cleared my throat.

Hope said at last: "Why do chaps like me take up this sort of work? Ever given that a thought? I'm a dull sort of chap, really. I like me bit of a garden, and I'm fond of me wife and kids. A bank clerk's job is more in my line, rising to bank manager. But instead of that I throw meself into this

game, hunting down criminals. My lord—what a life!" I realized that he was talking to give me time to collect myself, and I was duly grateful, but I listened, all the same, to what he was saying. "Working it out on an average, out of one week's work I get, perhaps, half an hour's satisfaction; half an hour out of one week, let's put it, is not wasted work. But, by gum, it's that half-hour that makes up for the rest of it! When you know your instinct has been right and you're on the right track! It's a thrill you'd never get as a bank manager. It's the sort of thing that makes a fisherman fish, I reckon, continually braced up by the thought of the thrill he's going to have when the fish bites, and the even greater thrill when he's landed his catch."

During this dissertation Inspector Hope never took his eyes off me. I realize now that even when his back had been towards me and he was apparently looking out of the window he was watching me attentively because the sun was streaming in and the part of the room in which I was standing was clearly reflected in the window. He knew me to be a smasher of skulls with bottles and didn't trust me an inch. I was also quite certain that the sergeant had not gone down to the car as usual but was lurking out of sight within a few yards of his chief.

He waited for me to say something and I said: "Well, your instinct is wrong this time. You chaps never allow for coincidence. There's a great deal more coincidence in real life than is ever allowable in fiction."

"This isn't a coincidence," the inspector said, "Mr. Edge dying mysteriously so shortly after writing that letter. There's no coincidence there."

"You'll have to *prove it*, that's all," I said lightly, but I was far from feeling light. I had a curious fluttering, almost a trembling, low down in my stomach, as though I had eaten nothing for weeks. I thought of the drunken man who said confidentially to his friend, "Don't look now, but I believe my stomach is full of butterflies!" I suppose I smiled inanely.

"What are you grinning at?" the inspector asked sharply.

Oddly enough, I told him.

CHAPTER XX

MY TIME is nearly up. When I have written the last words of my saga I shall ask for it to be wrapped up and sealed, and I shall ask for it to be sent to Inspector Hope with the request that it be read by no one but himself. I think he will read it avidly. He has not proved that Eli Edge's death was not a coincidence.

But I have. Alas, I have.

It is late now. The half-bottle of brandy which they have given me is on my table. My two companions are finding it difficult to keep awake, their heads keep nodding on to their chests. I have offered them some of the brandy but they have refused it, saying that I should drink most of it now and have a good night's sleep. I'm going to be a long time dead.

The inspector gathered up his treasures slowly and with meticulous care, counting the items as he replaced them in the shabby folder. Then he put the folder back into the pocket of his raincoat.

"Prove it, you say? Right. I will prove it."

And given time I think he would have proved it. But he hadn't time.

"Good-day, Sudley. I'll be seeing you. . . ."

I stood by the table, listening to the sound of his footsteps dying away. I wanted Polly there, beside me. Together we were an entity, apart we were lost.

I would go at once and fetch her back. It was too long since I had had Polly in my arms and too much had happened in the interval. Nothing now mattered but to have Polly beside me so that, together, we might face whatever might be in store for us.

But how was I to get there? I stalled at the idea of asking John Merry to take me. I would write. But no, she must come quickly. I would wire. I would go down to the village now and send a wire from the post office. But no, I couldn't even do that; within a quarter of an hour every inhabitant of Lambing

would know that I had wired for Polly to return and would speculate accordingly.

There was nothing for it but to go back to the town, from which I had recently returned, and send the wire off from there. I would signal for a lift in a lorry.

I wrote on a scrap of paper a draft of the wire:

Polly if you love me come back immediately all my love George.

I set off at once and returned within three hours, the wire having been duly despatched. The cows were milked late. I got myself some bread and cheese for supper and went to bed.

At the earliest, I reckoned, she could not be back before midday on the following day. She would have to take three buses in all to get her back here. Or maybe she would hire a car for part of the way.

Or maybe she wouldn't come at all.

I didn't get much sleep that night.

. . . . .

At breakfast Argo sat beside me, looking up at me with his limpid, honey-coloured eyes. And then I remembered something: Argo was going to show me how he got out with the four doors all bolted.

"Go on, Argo. Go on out, boy, and let me watch you."

Outside a hen said, "Tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck *in*!"

Argo simply looked up at me, his tongue hanging out, panting slightly. He didn't know what I was talking about.

"Go on out," I urged irritably.

But he wouldn't.

"All right then. I'll go round locking-up." I went round the doors, examining them, this time with minute attention. The first door I locked was the one through to my old quarters. There wasn't any doubt at all about that. A large key turned satisfactorily in a rusty old-fashioned lock and there was a fairly new bolt high up at the top of the door. The door of

the living-room had a similar lock, but it was completely effective. It also had an ancient bolt.

Then I turned my attention to the back door through which I never went. Now, in broad daylight, I laughed at what I saw. I think I laughed in relief at the simplicity of the whole affair. When I first came Eli had told me about the very fine dog they had had; he had told me, I remembered, how chicken thieves had been scared away by the dog. He had told me that he had had a *crude flap cut in the bottom of the back door so that the dog could get out on his own*. And there was the flap. I had not noticed it by the light of the torch! I pushed it, it opened outwards, creaking slightly; evidently it was not used frequently. It was about a foot and a half deep, and about one foot farther up the door was an ancient bolt. There was also a Yale lock on the door.

Leaving Argo in the scullery I went out, closing the door, and called him. He came out through the flap at once and I caressed his silken ears. "Good dog, good old boy!" But a great weight of horror pressed down on me. Two facts were instantly clear.

The first was that when Eli was found dead the door between the scullery and the living-room was shut. If it had not been, so much of the escaping gas would have gone through into the scullery and up into the corn-loft and been largely dissipated before the cylinders were empty. This seemed to be absolute proof that Argo could not have been in the living-room. If he had gone through into the scullery the dog could not have closed the door behind him. So Argo had not been in the house. He was excluded deliberately.

The second fact was that the bolt of the scullery door could be reached *from outside*. I lay down on the flagstone of the threshold, outside the closed door, raised the flap and, holding it up with one hand, I stretched my arm inside and upwards, full length, until I felt the bolt. I shot the bolt backwards and forwards several times to convince myself.

Argo thought it was some kind of game, he gambolled playfully around me but I pushed him aside.

I seemed to feel at the same time a great light and a great darkness.

I went back into the living-room and stared down at the gas-cooker. I turned on one of the taps at half-cock. The faintest whisper of escaping gas came to me. I turned it on full, the gas hissed out. I went across the room to the spot where Eli's sofa had stood. I could hear the gentle hiss of the gas if I listened carefully. Then I went back and turned it half-cock again. I returned to where the sofa would have been; I could hear nothing. I went back to the gas-stove and sniffed. I could certainly smell something, a faintly unpleasant smell, but quite definite.

The door into the scullery was shut, the outside door was shut, the windows were shut, the prickly curtain hung limply over the little back lobby, the scene was set as it had been the night Eli died.

How long, I wondered, before I would begin to feel anything?

I sat down in the armchair beside the fireplace.

I had left Argo outside. There was also the ubiquitous hen outside: "Tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck . . ."

I drew several deep breaths and felt nothing out of the ordinary. I sniffed again and now I could smell nothing. I kept on sniffing at short intervals and noted the fact that I had begun to feel a trifle sleepy and heavy-eyed.

A slight headache came on and presently a heavy lid of sleep seemed to be pressing me down into my chair. It may have been within minutes or merely a matter of seconds, but I suddenly realized I had not the slightest desire to get up and save myself from my foolish experiment. I wanted to stay where I was and go off to sleep.

My eyelids lay over my eyes like millstones; somewhere, miles away, I heard: "Tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck . . ." and I knew that there was something I must do.

I made the effort and staggered dizzily to the door, flinging it wide open and taking great gulps of God's fresh air. I leaned against the fence until I felt better and then I went back into the living-room and turned off the gas.

The clock told me that the whole episode had taken about twenty minutes, and from it I inferred several more facts. One was that Eli was probably dead within three-quarters of an

hour of beginning to breath the gas in, another was that he was almost certainly asleep or he would have noticed something unusual, and the third was that the room was pretty hermetically sealed for it to become a lethal chamber in so short a time.

I knelt down in the hearth and peered up the chimney. I could see no light from the sky whatsoever. I took the poker and pushed it up as far as it would go. When my arm was stretched at full length the end of the poker came up against something soft. I took the long, old-fashioned steel tongs and used them to pull at whatever it was that was blocking up the chimney. After several attempts I brought the thing down, together with a certain amount of soot.

It lay in the hearth and I stared at it as though at some obscene object. Though the object was harmless in itself, the implication of its presence in the chimney was, indeed, obscene.

It was the old black sateen eiderdown.

I tried to think I hadn't seen it before. But I knew damned well I had. I saw it that night I had made my tour of the house, the night Polly and Eli were out. I had seen it in the big oak press at the top of the stairs, the oak press on which the little owl had stood—indeed, still stood.

I charged upstairs.

Yes, there was the little owl, under his glass cover.

I lifted him down and opened the lid of the chest.

There was now no eiderdown inside, of course, for it had been used to tuck up the chimney.

I aimed a flying kick at the little owl.

The glass cover shattered into thousands of pieces and flew all over the polished linoleum covering the landing. The little owl lay there on his back, staring up at me in great surprise. I could have kicked him to pieces but I didn't. I left him lying there because, after all, it wasn't his fault, he had done his best to tell me!

. . . . .

Then I knew I had to see the little Tiffin. There was something I badly wanted to ask her. But first I took a great big pull of the horse's brandy.

"Tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck *in*!" went the persistent hen. She, too, had done her best to tell me. By heaven, it was tucked in! Somewhere I could hear a great clap of mirthless laughter and wondered greatly who it could be.

"Tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck, tuck . . ."

"Shut up!" I yelled, and aimed the empty bottle at the hen. It missed the hen and smashed to pieces, which lay all round the scullery door.

. . . . .

Mary Tiffin was haymaking in the Merrys' bottom field. I walked down over our own fields and when I got to the bottom I looked through the hedge. Mary and John were there and several other workers; John Merry employed occasional labour at busy times. I whistled shrilly and beckoned to Mary. John looked up and, leaning on his fork, he watched Mary coming to me at once. I guessed that John Merry had just about had enough of me.

"Yes?" Mary said a trifle breathlessly.

"Here, Mary, I want you."

She scrambled through at a comparatively easy place in the hedge.

"Yes?"

"Mary . . ." but I didn't find it easy to go on.

"You do look funny, George. What's wrong? You've been fretting, haven't you? Don't worry, you don't have to go off to the hospital today. Mrs. Merry fixed that for you."

"What do you mean?"

"They rang up again this morning. Miss Clay wants to see you. Mrs. Merry said you couldn't possibly come today as you're starting the hay-cutting. You are, aren't you?"

In my present trouble Madge Clay seemed so far away that I could scarcely remember her.

"Mary," I croaked, clearing my throat and starting again, "Mary. You remember the night Mr. Edge died?"

"Very well," she answered wonderingly.

"You remember—John was backing his car out into the lane and you were watching?"

"Yes."

"And I came bumping down across the green with Mr. Edge's bike?"

"Yes."

"And John called out, 'Is Polly ready?' and I answered 'No idea' or something of the sort?"

"Yes. I remember all that very well. You were whistling."

"What happened then?"

"I went up to tell Mrs. Edge we were ready and waiting."

"Did you go into the house?"

"I only got as far as the corner and she came out, all ready."

"Out of the living-room door, or what?"

She didn't answer my question but said: "Oh, George, I've been thinking hard. You remember asking me how I thought Argo got out of the house the night Mr. Edge died. Well, I've been thinking like you told me to. Mrs. Edge didn't leave him in the house when she came out. She took him out to the barn and tied him up."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Oh, George, don't look at me like that. Is it really important?"

I looked away, saying nothing.

"You can't always remember little details like that."

You can't. I appreciated that. All sorts of small details of everyday life escape one in retrospect, as I now know to my cost.

"But you remember it all now, Mary?"

"Yes, I do remember it now, since you asked me so definitely the other day. I would never have remembered otherwise."

"Tell me just what happened."

"Well, it wasn't much. I got to the corner and I may have called 'Mrs. Edge' or just 'Coo-ee' or something. She came out of the barn."

"The barn!"

"And I said, 'Ready?' or something like that, and she said yes, she'd been tying up Argo in the barn because he was so restless. She said Mr. Edge was having his nap and Argo was so restless she didn't want him disturbed, so she'd tied him up with a bit of old rope."

Yes, I had found the piece of old rope and had hung it tidily on a nail on the barn wall.

"——and I said I hoped Mr. Edge had got over his accident, and she said he was still a bit upset and —— What is all this for, George?"

"You needn't tell me any more," I said; "that's all I need to know." I turned away, sick at heart.

As I went away from her, off up the side of the hayfield, I was weaving from side to side, and it wasn't all the horse's brandy.

Somehow I got back up the fields and crossed over by the barn and up through the little field to our copse, Polly's and my copse. I lay down upon the spot where Polly and I had lain upon that memorable night.

I remembered that night now with bitter clarity.

Why had she chosen that particular night? Was it our quarrel which had decided her, or was it the fact that the life insurance was about to be put through and that if Eli died just before the transaction suspicion would be less likely to fall upon the widow? Or was it simply that she had *tried it*, somewhat as I had dallied with the idea of Eli's death? Perhaps, in her own mind, she had called it "arranging an accident"; there were so many things that might go wrong, it was so uncertain; yet it had worked, quite completely. And whether she called it "arranging an accident" or anything else, it was Wilful Murder.

It would seem, then, that she had not cared whether the cats died with Eli or not. But she had been fond of Argo and could not bear that he should die too.

She would wait until I had gone, she probably watched my departure from her bedroom window. Eli would be already asleep, she would fetch the small pan, the milk, light the gas (did she, perhaps, give the gas-tap a rub with a cloth or did she not bother to do so as the whole stove would have her finger-prints on it?) I could see her now, whispering good-night to Eli as he lay with his cats, as I had so often seen him, sleeping on the sofa with his mouth wide open. I could see her going round all the doors, bolting them carefully. She left through the back door, heard the Yale lock click and then lay

down, as I had done, upon the threshold, putting her arm inside the flap whilst she held it up with her other hand, thrusting the rusty old bolt home. I could see Argo grinning down at her, asking if it was some kind of game, as he had done with me. Then she had taken him across to the barn and tied him up.

And how had she felt when she came out of the barn and found Mary Tiffin had come up to the farm to hurry her up? She had told Mary so casually that she had left Argo in the barn that Mary had not remembered the incident until she had been pressed to do so. And so Polly had gone off down the green with Mary for her evening's outing.

I guessed that her plans went no further for if they had she would have remembered to remove the eiderdown from the chimney at some later date. She had gone straight to the barn on her return and untied Argo. If I had come back a minute or two sooner I would have seen her come out of the barn with the released Argo bounding happily ahead.

Poor Polly. All her anger against me and possibly her desire to destroy Eli had probably left her by then. She had stood in the lee of the great yew, shivering, waiting for my return. She had watched me coming up the green and passing her to put the bicycle away in the barn and then, when I came back, she had whispered to me.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she had whispered, and never had two words been spoken with greater meaning. She was sorry, I am sure.

How she had shivered!

I had thought her shivering for me.

. . . . .

I lay face downwards, my head upon my arms and tried not to think.

If only Polly would come, if only I could take the flesh-and-blood Polly in my arms, the smiling, loving Polly I knew so well, I might be reassured, I might know that the load of mischief I carried within me did not exist.

I now know that Polly had returned whilst I was talking

to Mary Tiffin in the bottom field. I shall never know in what mood she returned. All I do know is that she went straight into the living-room and saw at once the damning evidence lying, sooty and crumpled, in the hearth. She was in the house for about twenty minutes before the gun went off. What was she doing? Was she sitting in an armchair, breathless with the shock? Was she crying? Or was she simply trying to make up her mind? I don't know.

I lay in the copse, I afterwards learned, for about ten minutes.

The bright morning was shattered suddenly by a fearful noise; two jays who had been feeding upon Eli's peas rose with chattering screams and flew away. The noise was the sound of a gun going off, shots in rapid succession, like a machine-gun. It was Eli's gun, of course, the gun which I had caused, so many aeons ago, to have a hair-trigger.

She was lying on the floor of the living-room. I was there within sixty seconds, but she must have died instantly. Her eyes were wide open and blood was trickling from her mouth. I saw the marks of the shots where they had entered her neck, just below her right ear.

I picked up the gun, trying frantically to remember whether I left it loaded, but sure, even as I held it, that I had not.

When part of oneself is wounded, to ease the pain one holds that limb tightly, and it was thus that I held Polly, flesh of my flesh. She was still warm and supple; her head rolled backwards over my arm at a shocking angle. I think I moaned a bit, rocking her to and fro, kneeling there on the floor. I think I asked her over and over again why she used the gun, who or what she was going to shoot.

I was still able to use my eyes, and to a certain extent my brain. I saw Eli's shooting-bag, open on the chair with the bullet case open too. I realized that Polly had loaded the gun, and I had not even known she could use a gun. I saw, too, the eiderdown, crumpled and sooty, lying in the hearth as I had left it. I laid Polly down gently and, taking the eiderdown outside, I shook it, then I took it upstairs, folded it and replaced it in the oak chest beneath all the blankets.

Downstairs in the living-room her small case and handbag

stood beside the door. She must have seen the eiderdown in the hearth immediately.

Polly, Polly, why didn't you come out to find me before you took out the gun? Or were you going to come and find me *with the gun*? Or were you going to shoot yourself because you couldn't face me?

I shall never know.

. . . . .

It was Ma Merry who found us.

She had seen Polly return in the hired car, had allowed half an hour, and then had come up with offers of a meal. It was she who found us.

"Oh, George!" she said. "What have you done?"

. . . . .

But in spite of this Ma Merry is the only person who believes that I did not shoot Polly. She came to see me for the last time yesterday. There was plate glass between us and she had to raise her voice to make herself heard. The warders moved away; they are the salt of the earth, those chaps.

She said: "Whatever you may say, George, *I* know you didn't shoot Polly. There's still time, dear, why don't you tell the whole truth?"

"But I don't know the whole truth."

"I'm sure I do," she cried. "Polly was mad. She was so jealous that it was like insanity. She loaded the gun to shoot *you*, George, because of Madge Clay. It went off accidentally."

I shook my head firmly.

She didn't do that, I thought. But am I sure? She killed Eli because she was jealous of me, afraid that whilst Eli lived I would only dally with her and perhaps marry Madge Clay. Why should she not kill me?

"I am guilty," I said, and I have said so all along.

At length she had to go. She was quite in control of herself. Her last words were: "*God* knows you didn't do it, George, and that is what matters. Good-bye, dear."

. . . . .

Well, it is eight o'clock, or nearly. I've had a good breakfast. The brandy bottle is still on my table beside me, untouched, there is an hour yet before my story is finished.

The two warders who have been sitting with me these last weeks are a great deal more uncomfortable than I, poor chaps. The gallows has been erected, we all know that. The banging yesterday shook the whole place; my lads couldn't meet my eyes. But I went on steadily writing and pretended I heard nothing. It stands within fifteen paces of my cell.

Have I left anything unsaid which would be of interest to Inspector Hope?

I think not. I think the whole story must lie clearly before him except, perhaps, the final question, which may not be as unanswerable to him as to myself.

Well, he arrested me.

"I have to charge you," he said almost sadly, "with the wilful murder of Mrs. Pauline Annie Edge."

I looked blank, I am sure; I had no idea who Pauline Annie Edge was until I realized that, of course, it was Polly, my Polly (Annie after Mum!). I nodded. He cautioned me about anything I might say, but I said nothing at all. All the way through I said nothing except that I wanted to plead guilty.

If I had not pleaded guilty I have no doubt at all that at the trial the forensic experts would have argued for days about the position of the wounds and how it would be a physical impossibility for the gun to have been fired by me. As it was I insisted on pleading guilty, to the bitter disappointment of the great young barrister who was called upon to defend me. Though he didn't actually say so, his attitude was one of, "It's selfish of you, Sudley, to plead guilty, it doesn't give a feller a chance!"

But if I had pleaded not guilty what a hopeless case it would have been to defend! There never was a clearer case of murder.

The judge appeared to accept my plea of guilty without any show of reluctance. The counsel for the prosecution launched into a story as rich as a plum cake, and as indigestible. I had great difficulty in realizing that it was myself

who was being presented. I was made out to be as attractive to women as any flashy film star, I didn't recognize myself. All the women, it would appear, fell for me. I dallied with first one, then another. More than dallied; indeed, I got one of them in the family way (nobody, it seemed, even dimly suspected that her husband might possibly be the father!). I became heavily involved at the same time with another woman, name not disclosed, to whom I was engaged.

Inspector Hope had collected the material for his case with great thoroughness. Eyvind, for instance, had told how he had one day found me examining Edge's rifle. The woman who did the rough work had told how she had heard Polly and myself having a violent quarrel in the living-room. It would seem that the entire village had been eager to tell of my immoral goings-on with Madge Clay. The fact of our having been seen talking and laughing together for "a long time" outside the post office in full view of the entire village within a few days of my arrival at Hill Farm became extremely sinister.

The learned counsel passed on to the story of Polly's destruction which seemed ineluctable: she was my mistress but I tired of her; we quarrelled, she went away from me to her home. In her absence I became further involved with the nameless woman, so much so that I determined to destroy Pauline Annie Edge and my unborn bastard. I sent for her to return, a falsely loving message which when read out caused everyone to look at me with ill-disguised horror. She returned. I had had something to drink and was somewhat violent; evidence, the broken bottle outside the door and the ravaged stuffed owl; we had another furious quarrel which ended in my taking the gun and shooting her.

I thought of Eli, he was barely mentioned, how furious he would have been!

My defending counsel rose to a court absolutely tense and still. "My lord," he said, "I find my position a very difficult one. My instructions are that I am to say nothing at all on behalf of my client," and as he sat down he gave his wig a little jerk forward as though detaching himself completely.

Inspector Hope supplied, almost it would seem with reluctance, details of my record.

And then it was all over.

When the judge pronounced the death sentence his eyes were hard. ". . . and may the Lord have mercy on your soul," he said, so harshly that he might actually have added, "But I see no reason why He should."

The padre is a good chap; I have made my peace with God and, in the words of the burial psalm which they will shortly start reading out aloud as we progress from the cell to the death chamber, *I held my tongue and spake nothing: I kept silence, yea, even from good words; but it was pain and grief to me.*

At the very end, when I am standing on the platform with the bag over my head, the padre will whisper to me, "Anything you want to say, Sudley?"

That is why I am not going to drink any of the brandy they have provided, for, far from giving me courage, it would undermine it. I pray that, at the very end, I may still have the strength to nod my head and say, once again, "Yes, I am guilty."

Here they come . . .

THE END